

The Rise and fall of star wars, blog #1

6/21/2017

43 Comments

I came back from lunch to find that George Lucas had sold his company.

An email addressed to "LUCAS-USA," myself included, read, "I wanted to let you know that today Bob Iger and I have signed an agreement for The Walt Disney Company to acquire Lucasfilm. I wanted to be there to tell you in person, however Disney asked that I be at a press event with Bob in L.A. this afternoon. As soon as it is over I will be boarding a plane so that Kathy and I can meet with you for a more in-depth discussion.... George."

His sale of Lucasfilm to Disney included the intellectual copyrights to *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones*. A follow-up email from a staffer explained where to find the shuttle buses that were waiting to take those without cars from our San Francisco offices to Point Richmond, where a large, empty warehouse big enough for the whole company to congregate in had been reserved. It was a sunny Tuesday. October 30, 2012. In the hallways and passageways between offices and cubicles, people skittered about, shouting out who was going with whom, and what it all might mean. I piled into a friend's car with others, and we were among the first to arrive on the windswept headland by the bay, not far from where Pixar Animation used to be housed. In fact, Bay Area filmmaking was all around us: Tippet Studio was about 20 miles to the south, as was producer Saul Zaentz's company Fantasy Film; Pixar had moved to Emeryville, another few exits down Highway 80, while Francis Ford Coppola's American Zoetrope was back in San Francisco. Lucas had championed this filmmaking community, often referred to as "Hollywood North" (a misnomer), throughout his career—even bankrolling a book and documentary about it, *Cinema by the Bay* (which is another story)—but now, we, his former employees, were potentially to be moved south. As I entered the warehouse, I couldn't help imagining a forced march to Burbank, to Hollywood.

Readers of this blog may know that I'd worked closely with George Lucas on many book projects, while studying and writing about the history of Lucasfilm for over a decade, but they won't know that I'd always thought that Lucas would sell his company to Disney. I'd pegged the date to around 2022, however, so I was as surprised as anyone by his sudden move. I'd also thought Sony might be a contender. The Japanese were and are crazy about *Star Wars*. But when I spoke to George a few weeks later, he told me that Sony didn't have deep enough pockets. He'd considered Comcast briefly. He'd taken a look at a few of the Internet giants, too. But Disney had always been the frontrunner.

I'd figured George had to sell—his three adult kids weren't interested, it seemed—and Disney was his best bet to keep his characters and franchise alive. Disney and its chairman Bob Iger were also hell-bent on the acquisition of intellectual properties, having gobbled up Winnie-the-Pooh and The Muppets, Marvel and Pixar. Besides, Lucas had been in business with "The Mouse" since the first *Star Tours* ride opened in Disneyland several decades before. You didn't have to be smart to know a sale was in the cards.

But it was too soon for many. The atmosphere in the lofty space, as more of the two-thousand-plus employees swarmed through the doors, was a mixture of sadness for the past and anxiety for the future. Though no one at Lucasfilm restrained from criticism of Lucasfilm, ever—indeed, it was a way of life for some people—George was liked and admired by most. He'd created various waking dreams, solace and inspiration to millions, first in *American Graffiti*, then *Star Wars*, then *Indiana Jones*. The spinoff toys, books, comic books, and videogames—but mostly the toys—had been a big part of childhood's fabric for

many people in the U.S. and abroad. Quite a few of those strolling in to find a good spot from which to view the elevated stage had grown up with those plastic X-wings, *Millennium Falcons*, and action figures.

Although there were plenty of non-fans at Lucasfilm, hundreds of people had chosen to come, as artists, technicians, craftspeople, or support staff, to the safe-haven of the creative companies Lucas had founded: visual effects powerhouse Industrial Light & Magic, state-of-the-art postproduction facility Skywalker Sound, or pioneering videogame maker LucasArts. Taking their seats around me in plastic folding chairs were newbies and those who'd been with George from the beginning, such as tall, wispy haired ILM legend Dennis Muren and even taller Paul Huston, another multitalented visual effects veteran. Over the past few years, I'd been lucky enough to get to know them both.

Others had started in one of Lucas's various San Anselmo offices in the late 1970s, at Skywalker in the late 1980s or at Big Rock Ranch and his latest campus on the Presidio in the aughts. Not many of them had much if any contact with George, but he was still their boss, their distant and quirky leader. I'd been fortunate enough to get to know him, too, and this was going to be his goodbye.

How did he get to this point? How did we end up in those seats to ask him questions about the future of Lucasfilm?

The rest of this blog *The Rise and Fall of Star Wars* will answer those questions and more. If that interests you, then read on... (Friday. I'm going to try and post new material Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays).

Please note: This blog is about my time at Lucasfilm, from October 1, 2001, to December 31, 2015. As such, though I'll try to be objective, my observations are no doubt my subjective views of these years, not any clinical "truth."

Next: Two Sides of the Bay, the 1970s.

[The Rise and Fall of Star Wars. Blog #2](#)

6/23/2017

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Two Sides of the Bay

Circa 1974, while George Lucas was writing his rough draft of “The Star Wars” in San Anselmo, California, I was attending Martin Luther King Junior High School, across the bay in Berkeley, trying to survive a pretty tough place.

Although seemingly separated by the San Francisco Bay, an age gap, and circumstances, my circle of family and friends were closer to those of various filmmakers and Lucas than I knew. Given the crowded temporal spaceways of present, future, and past, those two worlds often overlapped as the decade went on, in a case of colliding individuals and interconnected free-wheeling destinies.

Our Berkeley neighbor on North Street, a steep dead-end block of shingle houses, was Ernest “Chick” Callenbach, a skinny, thoughtful man who wrote *Ecotopia* and was the long-time editor of *Film Quarterly*. George Lucas and other young directors, writers, editors, cinematographers, and movie nuts would stop by Chick’s house to hang out and talk about the latest films, new techniques and equipment, cameras, and the business during the early 1970s.

I doubt I crossed paths with them then, but Chick was often around, getting in and out of his Citroen DS, and I got to know him because his son, Hans, and I were part of a neighborhood gang of kids who played together. They also had a dachshund that ate bees. *Film Quarterly*, which Chick founded in 1958, helped galvanize Bay Area filmmakers, an eccentric community that wanted to be independent of the stagnant entertainment industry 500 miles to the south.

Published in 1975, Chick’s *Ecotopia* was a groundbreaking novel about a similar kind of thinking, where northern California, Oregon, and Washington seceded from the United States to form a more civilized, more balanced society, ecologically, in terms of gender, and in its sexuality and politics. (Decades later, Chick gave me the videogame rights to *Ecotopia* and asked me to find a publisher, but I was unsuccessful in sparking interest.)

My father* had been lured to Berkeley by the founder of *Rolling Stone* magazine, Jann Wenner. So in 1970, we’d all moved from New York City to the West Coast where he became the magazine’s Associate Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of the division Straight Arrow Books. My father, Alan, had edited and published Chick’s first book, *Living Poor With Style*, at Straight Arrow in 1972, but had rejected *Ecotopia*.

A short walk away from the *Rolling Stone* offices, at 746 Brannon, was American Zoetrope, at 827 Folsom, the fledgling independent film company co-founded by Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas. Workdays, my father would take the bus or drive into the city to work at *Rolling Stone*/Straight Arrow’s funky offices south of Mission. Often, he would take me with him, on school holidays, anytime I was sick, and many weekends. We never strolled over to Zoetrope, even for a peek, but a common denominator of the two groundbreaking enterprises was drugs.

Throughout these years, so many people, particularly in the arts, were on so many drugs, that, as a kid, I had an almost permanent contact high. I didn’t take drugs, didn’t smoke pot, wasn’t interested, but didn’t

need to. When the so-called grown-ups around me were tripping on LSD in Tilden Park, I could see Godzilla coming over the yellow hills. Jann Wenner tried to put my five-year-old brother, Peter, in a refrigerator; joints were passed around at pool parties—and there's another connection. A young Rolling Stone photographer named Annie Leibovitz often came to those laid-back shindigs, took a shot of my brother Peter he still treasures, and, decades later, having become world-renown, she would take exclusive photos of George Lucas and the cast of each Prequel Trilogy Star Wars film for Vanity Fair.

My parents divorced the year after we arrived in California, but they both stayed in Berkeley. Alan bought a house in the hills above the Claremont Resort Hotel, where one of his partners in drug-addled madness, writer Hunter S. Thompson, came to work with him. At that age, about 12, all I knew about Hunter Thompson was what I'd read about "Uncle Duke"—the crazy character modeled on Hunter in "Doonesbury," Gary Trudeau's comic strip. I read it every morning in the newspaper without fail. Uncle Duke was a narcotics-fueled fiend with a violent streak, and my experience with Hunter only confirmed that.

I remember splashing and swimming around in the water at the Claremont while Thompson sat chain-smoking by the hotel's swanky pool in a bathing suit and cowboy boots, with bare, skinny torso and dark sunglasses, crouched over a round, white metal table littered with ashtrays and typed pages.

He and my dad were working on some book—they would collaborate on several, which is another story—but one day circa 1974 my father was supposed to drive Hunter to the airport. He took me along for the ride, probably because it was a weekend and I was staying with him.

We arrived at the Claremont early one morning, took the elevator up to the honeymoon suite just under the flagpole tower, and found Hunter's room. My father knocked. No answer. He knocked again, louder. No answer. Then, because my father had no patience at all—we're talking none—he pounded and kicked at the door, stretching its hinges and screaming at Hunter to open up. Moments later, Hunter appeared, scowling and unshaven, wearing a towel. Behind him I saw a half-naked woman in a messy bed. Hunter had completely forgotten about his flight.

As editor and babysitter, my father stormed in and began furiously throwing Hunter's shirts, pants, and underwear into a suitcase.

We made it to the car—a long open convertible—and I sat in the back with Hunter as we tore down the highway across the Bay Bridge toward the San Francisco airport. I looked up at him and asked, "What would you do if you met Gary Trudeau?"

Hunter looked down at me. He had a long, haggard face, and, with a cigarette dangling from his lip (I swear), he drawled (Hunter was from Kentucky): "I'd rip his lungs out."

A colorful and aptly phrased response, which I never forgot. Later I read a few of his books and it turned out Hunter Thompson wasn't just some insane drug freak. He could write. I read a lot as a kid, but I never considered writing; in those days I liked to draw. "Writing" my comic books was secondary to drawing.

George Lucas didn't take drugs and he began work on his third draft of "The Star Wars" in 1975, the year Jann Wenner fired my father ("for no good reason," my dad told me, "but I'd lasted longer than any other Rolling Stone executive"). I'd never liked Wenner, who was abrasive and, even in a kid's eyes, manipulative. With the money from his severance deal, my father decided to become a film producer.

The Rise and Fall of Star Wars, Blog #3

6/26/2017

5 Comments



A Kid at Universal Studios

My dad wrangled a developmental deal to produce *Sheena, Queen of the Jungle*, so they gave him and his partner Paul Aratow a bungalow at Universal Studios. On subsequent trips down south between the years 1975 and 1977, he brought me with him and I was able to wander around the lot on my own. The experience of being surrounded by actual movies and TV shows being filmed increased my knowledge about how they were actually made, the process. I completely fell in love with movies, which I'd already had a big crush on. During one self-guided "tour," I saw actor Raymond Burr, *walking*, which was a shock, for his character was always in a wheelchair on TV's *Ironside* (only later did I realize he'd played the heavy in Hitchcock's *Rear Window*). Outside a soundstage, I saw Robert Conrad from *Wild, Wild West* seated in the cockpit section of a WWII fighter plane in front of a painted cloud backing being rocked sideways and up and down by a crew for TV's *Black Sheep Squadron*. On another day, my father snuck me onto a sound stage where I saw a cast of black and white actors in an unusually radical film called *Car Wash* written by Joel Schumacher (a friend of my father's) and starring Richard Pryor, among many others.

My biggest thrill came on a sunny southern California day circa 1976. It must have been lunchtime or something, for I was able to saunter through huge sliding doors onto a soundstage where, lit half in the sun, half in shade, I saw the mechanical shark for *Jaws*. Either the original or a modified one. It was on two or three saw horses, probably being prepared for the Universal Studio Tour (during which it would eventually surge out of a lake to terrify visitors seated in two-car open trams). A crew or someone must have been working on the shark, because a large section of its synthetic skin had been taken off; the discarded segments, like irregular pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, were stored in a wooden crate on the ground. Consequently I could stare in wonder at the mechanical beast's complex entrails—and that was mind-boggling. I was face-to-face with the monster that had completely terrified and traumatized me only a year before (see "The Jaws Blog" on this site for an interpretation of that film). Little did I know that Lucas's tiny production office for "The Star Wars" was across the street from Universal in a trailer parked on a lot, for he'd directed his previous film, *American Graffiti*, for that studio. In fact my

father was friendly with Verna Fields, one of its editors, who'd also edited *Jaws*. I could have crossed the street and knocked on the door to Lucas's trailer, and perhaps glimpsed Ralph McQuarrie's paintings for the movie to come, because at that time no one knew about it and no one cared.

Oddly enough, a few months later, my father and his partner Paul drove Carrie Fisher from Los Angeles to Las Vegas, where she was singing and performing with her mother, Debbie Reynolds. "She was a real honey, a sweetheart," Alan told me later. "No airs or pretensions, which was unusual for Hollywood, especially with her star power, but scandalous parents."

When Lucas departed for England and Tunisia to shoot his film about a farm boy named Luke who leaves home and discovers the Force, I was stuck at Berkeley High School. High School wasn't all bad, but like Luke Skywalker and a million other teenagers, I couldn't wait to get out.

A year later, in 1977, I did not want to go see *Star Wars*. My mother and her live-in boyfriend of several years, Jerry Graham, had tickets to a preview showing at the Coronet Theater in San Francisco. Jerry was the manager of KSAN, a popular radio station, and often received free passes to events. One of his DJs, Terry McGovern would come over to the house and he was another connection. McGovern had played the high school principal in *American Graffiti*; even earlier, in a voice-over for *THX 1138*, McGovern had invented a word—"I think I ran over a *Wookiee*"—that Lucas had later used to describe a giant furry alien.

Jerry told Peter and I that *Star Wars* was a science-fiction movie, which was, for me, the wrong genre. Not too long before, I'd been obliged by my father to see *Solaris*, a Russian art-house sci-fi movie, and had sat there in mute incomprehension for what seemed a very, very long time.

But my brother and I went along to the Coronet. After the lights went down in the old movie palace, my brother has always claimed that Lucas stood up and was applauded. When the movie started—in mind-popping 70mm and the best sound system in the city—we were blown away. As it did for nearly all kids, *Star Wars* felt unique, unlike anything before or since. I loved it. However, I was a little bit too old to really dive into the whole thing as deep as those who were eight or nine or younger.

Peter was more into it than I was. He saw *The Empire Strikes Back* first and told me I *had* to go see it. I stood in line, saw it, and liked it. But by the time *Return of the Jedi* came out in 1983, I was going to New York University, living in the East Village, dating, going to hear The Ramones and Gang of Four, and thought that the Ewoks were beyond stupid.

Star Wars was over.

Next: *Star Wars* Wasn't Over...

The Rise and Fall of Star Wars, Blog #4

6/28/2017

13 Comments



Peter Paul Ruben's 1603 copy of the lost Battle of Anghiari fresco-size drawing by da Vinci—Battle for the Standard.

A Winding Road to Lucasfilm

Circa 1988, on a summer day in a secondhand bookstore in Provincetown, Cape Cod, I happened upon Thomas G. Smith's excellent and first-of-its-kind book *Industrial Light & Magic: The Art of Special Effects*. Reading through his coffee-table history during that vacation, I realized that all of the *Star Wars* stuff I'd forgotten about had been spun off into an immensely innovative and creative company. Page upon illustrated page revealed ILM's groundbreaking work on such films as *E.T.*, *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, *Back to the Future*, and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

Back in Oakland, California, where I was living—married, with a new-born—and working—one of six proofreaders at a computer book publishing company—my main occupation was figurative painting. Our living room was my studio. Because I thought my somewhat traditional style might be close to matte painting (it wasn't), I sent my slides to Industrial Light & Magic. I had an idea that perhaps they'd teach me.

A couple of weeks later, I received a letter back saying they preferred people with experience and talent, though worded more nicely.

We moved to France for most of the 1990s, because my wife, Geneviève, is half-French, half-Catalan. We started our new life with the clothes in our suitcases, and a spoon. I changed. It's a good idea to go live somewhere else for a while if you can, if it's necessary, and start anew. And I found myself, as the painting juice ran out, drawn more and more back toward film, the kind of things I loved as a kid. Eventually I stopped painting entirely in order to make a living. The only thing I could do over there, in the beginning, was teach English, but I was able to find a business college that needed someone to provide courses on art, any kind of art. So, in addition to literature and art history, I taught courses on Hitchcock and Spielberg. I even made some unintentionally hilarious short subjects, and tried my hand at scriptwriting.

At the end of our stay abroad I was able to find a gig as an associate producer for a videogame company called Monte Cristo Multimedia, where I wrote the live-action cut-scenes and directed the animation for one production.

At some point during that last year in France I stood in line to see the revamped *Star Wars* Trilogy; their showings in cinemas across Paris sold out. The movies had aged well. Although I wasn't crazy about many of the changes Lucas had made to *Star Wars*, I saw them as his films—he could do with them what he wanted—and the French audiences cheered and applauded. Seeing the trilogy again on large screens with hundreds of people was energizing.

Then, partially because I wanted to work in the visual arts business, we decided to move back to the USA. We also now had two daughters, and we wanted them to grow up in America.

Professionally, it was really the film/multimedia-art connection that interested me (in particular, Lucasfilm/ILM, the one I'd read about in Smith's book, though I didn't seriously think I could work there). Before giving up painting, for years I'd studied the works of the Renaissance masters in churches and museums (I'd also worked at the Met, in NYC). I didn't like abstract art, for the most part, though I appreciated what they were doing; their work seemed more like philosophy than painting. But abstract painting had been the dominant Fine Art form for a generation or two. At Parsons School of Design, where I'd gone for my freshman and sophomore years (I transferred to NYU as a junior), when I asked them about learning about anatomy, I was looked at like some kind of freak by my older drawing professor. He wanted me to be more original. Abstraction and personal expression was in; figurative and traditional was out. By the late 1990s, it seemed that many figurative artists had gone underground, in a sense, re-becoming what they had once been: craftspeople in service of story. In the earliest paintings for churches, the stories or pictorial idea-scapes had been supplied by religion, the Bible, or a patron or an institution. As ideas about the human condition changed, painters of the 15th and 16th Century had used re-birthed ideas about perspective, mathematics, and the human form to create large-scale frescoes illustrating and interpreting those same stories—the 70mm of those times.

While those in the film business working in the traditional arts—drawing, painting, sculpting, and model-making—were not reaching the heights of the Renaissance, they were creating art that served a story. And when their work was combined with the other arts involved in making a movie—writing, acting, editing, sound design, photography, music, etc.—the totality *was* comparable to the works of those 16th Century masters.

So, in 1998, we moved back to the Bay Area, where I once again went in search of a more creative job. Through friends of friends, I was able to wrangle a kind of meet-and-greet with Colin Brady at Pixar Animation in Point Richmond, where he toured me through rooms overflowing with artwork and storyboards for *Toy Story 2*, which at that time was going to be a TV movie. (Brady was going to direct; when the movie became a theatrical feature, Lasseter replaced him as director.) I was impressed and liked the atmosphere, one of fun and joy in what they were doing. But I had no skills that fit into their world (those guys could really draw!).

I eventually found employment as the managing editor of *GamePro*, a videogame magazine (located about six blocks away from the old *Rolling Stone* offices), with the long-term goal of finding a place at a studio that was actually making a film or videogame. During my second year there, I was told that a place called Skywalker Ranch existed, a kind of Xanadu. Because I was reviewing movies for *GamePro*'s online website, I was able to talk Alex Laurant, an art director at ILM, into giving me a tour of the facility so I could write about their work in *The Mummy Returns* (2001). What I saw convinced me that Lucasfilm was really the place to be: all kinds of artists in a vast workshop setting were doing a variety of creative jobs. Perhaps because my frame of reference was the Renaissance, I saw ILM as a modern-day guild environment—but on an even grander scale, using the latest techniques, down to inventing their own tools, even grinding lenses for revolutionary cameras. Taking a few steps back, I saw parallels between Lucas and the Florentine patrons. As the founder of ILM, LucasArts, THX, Skywalker Sound, the director of *American Graffiti*, and the creator of the Indiana Jones and Star Wars franchises, he was spawning a similar revolution in the arts. From what I could tell, he had a similar love for the Humanities, combined with a knowledge of composition, a similar interest in the past, in the Classics, a love of rhythm which came through in the editing, in the music, and in the forms going across the two-dimensional surface of his films—a spirit was shared by this kid from Modesto and those earlier patrons of that glorious City State.

Not only did he have a forward-thinking company, a whole freakin' all-star roster of artists and groundbreaking technicians, Lucas was back making movies—Episode I: *The Phantom Menace* had just come out and I'd really liked it, as had my older daughter, who was about 11 at the time. And, believe me, I don't say I liked Episode I lightly, because I know that people whom I respect find this baffling. However, I find their inability to see past a few flaws to the greater achievements of Episode I to be equally baffling. My daughter and I attended a preview of the movie in SF, so in that brief moment before the backlash and after, none of the government or trade blockade material bothered me; in fact I found it interesting—true, Jar Jar and some of the jokes were not to my taste, but neither had the Ewoks been a rousing success—and it was great enough to see Jedi in their prime (though, clearly, representing a flawed Order, which was also intriguing); Liam Neeson was good; Darth Maul was a fantastic villain; the art direction was beautiful (it would've been redundant to see the same universe as before, given that it's a different galactic time period); and the Podrace—a showstopper—was a symphony in sound design, like the speeder-bike chase in *Jedi*. I was ready for the sequel—and I wanted to be there, involved. (More on the quality of the Prequels later.) So I applied to LucasArts, the videogame arm of Lucas's company. No dice. I sent in two or three other applications for Lucasfilm jobs that I was probably unqualified for. I had a telephone interview for a position on the short-lived website, *starwarskids.com*. Nope, nope, and nope. In the year 2001, anyone could easily see what positions were available by logging onto Lucasfilm's website. One as "editor" came up. This time, my online application resulted in an almost immediate call back from Human Resources (HR). I was invited to interview at Skywalker Ranch.

Wearing a suit jacket and a Tintin tie (I also really like Hergé), I checked in at the Stable House, where a nice woman named Julia Cardinale in HR told me to lose the jacket. Lucasfilm wasn't that kind of place. I

was scheduled to meet with Lucy Autrey Wilson, Director of Publishing, in the Carriage House (both houses were brown shingled, at the back of Skywalker, abutting the hills).

A little about Lucy Wilson. In 1974, she was working in La Jolla, San Diego, at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, in the machine shop as a bookkeeper. Her sister was working for Tong & Fong. Her sister's boss, Richard Tong was the accountant for George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola. "My sister got Richard to recommend me for the job at Lucasfilm, sight unseen," Wilson says. "Richard didn't know me. I think he assumed if I was related to my sister, who was good at her job, I must be good also."

Tong was right. Wilson went to work in the San Anselmo office, known as Parkway House—which consisted of producer Gary Kurtz; Bunny Alsup, who was Kurtz's sister-in-law and his assistant; and founder George Lucas—and by the time I arrived for my interview, Lucy was considered Lucasfilm's #1 corporate hire, and was the company's longest-serving employee. Part of her job back in 1974 was to do some production accounting, but her main responsibility was maintaining corporate accounts and performing other office tasks, like typing, etc. (Later, Lucy's sister would go to work for Coppola.)

Wilson therefore typed up all Lucas's handwritten pages into the scripts for *Star Wars*, as she says, "over and over in various iterations," from rough draft, to revisions, to fourth draft. She played volleyball with the next few hires, helped cook meals, and did whatever else was needed.

When Lucasfilm expanded and Lucas hired an executive assistant, Jane Bay, Wilson moved over to ILM for a while, in San Rafael, taking a position in the corporate accounting department offices, sitting for a while in "B" Building, then in the Bel Marin office next door to what would become the Pixar folks, before moving to Skywalker Ranch circa 1986, still in accounting. "It was after we moved to the ranch that Howard Roffman hired me to join the new licensing group he was putting together (the old group under Maggie Young had mostly all left by then)," Wilson says.

Lucy became the Director of Publishing in the newly formed licensing group, and that's one of the things I would learn to really appreciate about Lucasfilm. People were not pigeon-holed. A gardener could become a film editor. An editor, a writer. A secretary, president of ILM. An accountant, head of publishing.

Roffman was reforming the department because by 1986, licensing and publishing were moribund, having fizzled out in 1983 with the last published *Star Wars* spin-off novel. *Star Wars* was so dead—despite the Ewok movies and cartoons—that licensing sought out other properties, even doing Grateful Dead tie-in comic books. In an attempt to revive at least the book business, Wilson convinced Roffman to ask Lucas on her behalf if he'd agree to her seeking out a publisher to do a new *Star Wars* novel, to create a new *Star Wars* story. "George said okay," Wilson says, "with the caveat that we could only develop the period after *Return of the Jedi*. I don't think he thought it would amount to much. Nor did anyone else, or they wouldn't have let me do it."

With Wilson driving it, and published by Bantam, author Timothy Zahn's *Heir to the Empire* hit and stayed at #1 in 1991. Not only did it jump-start LucasBooks, helped along by Dark Horse Comics' *Dark Empire* series, it ignited a *Star Wars* renaissance. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that Lucas and others at Lucasfilm were surprised. Lucas took notice of his creation's uninterrupted popularity. He may have started thinking seriously about making more *Star Wars* movies. ILM's digital effects for *Jurassic Park*, two years later, provided the final push.

By the time I arrived for my interview, Lucas and Lucasfilm were in the middle of making Episode II: *Attack of the Clones*—licensing had exploded and publishing was thriving. The book division was doing so well in fact that Wilson was looking to expand into nonfiction more seriously. That day in her office, which looked onto a shady porch, I sat opposite my potential boss. Poised, she had sandy hair and glasses, and asked, “What do you think of the Expanded Universe?”

“What’s that?” I asked.

This was the sort of right answer. The “Expanded Universe” referred to spinoff *Star Wars* material—books, comic books, videogames, roleplaying games, toys, etc.—things that would have excited the average fan, but which meant nothing to me. I was interested only in the films, which was fortunate, because Wilson had learned that diehard fans were often not dispassionate enough to do effective work.

I then interviewed with several more folks in publishing, including book designer Iain Morris, a younger, giant of an Englishman, whose handshake crushed several bones in my hand. Strangely, he liked my Tintin tie. I didn’t hear anything for a week or two, but I’d made up my mind to accept a pay cut if offered (for I’d be moving backward from managing editor to editor), in order to work at such an amazing place. During my day there, I’d been impressed by Wilson, Morris, the people, and the environment.

On September 11, 2001, after taking the bus to the *GamePro* offices south of Mission, I had to flee San Francisco back to Petaluma, taking the ferry because the Golden Gate Bridge had been closed for security reasons. Geneviève picked me up at the Larkspur terminal and we drove home, shaken to our bones, like everyone else. I called my older brother, Ben, who lived in NYC and he told me of the black smoke he’d seen pouring down the avenues.

Late that morning the phone rang. It was Julia from Lucasfilm HR. “I know it’s a terrible, sad day,” she said. “But we wanted to make it a slightly better day for at least one person: You got the job.” It was impossible to be happy, but it was welcome news.

Next (Friday): Exploring Skywalker Ranch

The Rise and Fall of Star Wars, Blog #5

6/30/2017

10 Comments



An old photo of the Winchester House, south of San Francisco, in San Jose.

In the Valley

When we'd moved to Petaluma a few years before, I wasn't even sure if George Lucas's ranch existed. But Geneviève and I had been attracted to the relatively small city of 50,000 people in the North Bay, about 45 minutes from SF, by its several bookstores; comic book store; two cinemas; and its general feel. It seemed like a great place to raise two girls.

The "West Side" of Petaluma—west of the 101 Freeway—was even smaller: beautiful neighborhoods of Queen Anne, Victorian, and Arts-and-Crafts houses, shaded by old oak trees, and in walking distance of one of the more well-preserved downtowns in America. Petaluma had been spared the big earthquake of 1906; its 19th Century architecture was still intact, and its main drag, Petaluma Boulevard, hadn't changed much since the 1960s, with many of the original storefronts and signage preserved. It was for this reason that Lucas had fled to Petaluma in 1972 to shoot *American Graffiti*. He'd originally intended to make his movie about cruising, music, and leaving home on the streets of San Rafael (his home town of Modesto had already changed too much to be a candidate), about 20 miles south, but that city, after complaints from local merchants on the first night of filming, had kicked him out. By the second night, he and his actors—Ron Howard, Richard Dreyfuss, Harrison Ford, Cindy Williams, et al—and his small crew were up and running in Petaluma (which, consequently, has an *American Graffiti* Day each year in May, during which classic cars cruise the downtown, with music from the 1950s and 1960s piped through outdoor speakers). Petaluma also turned out to be the most affordable city a short commute from Skywalker, about 30 minutes, and a number of Lucasfilm employees called it home at that time, from concept artists Iain McCaig and Robert Barnes, to image archives manager Tina Mills and starwars.com guru Pablo Hidalgo, to the head of fan relations and owner of the largest *Star Wars* memorabilia collection in the world, Steve Sansweet. Over the next decade, I would be fortunate enough to get to know them.

Our house was in “Old East Petaluma”—that is, west of the freeway, but east of the train tracks that originally divided the town—which was a working class neighborhood. On one corner of our block was a big brick building that contained a twine factory, which went out of business shortly after our arrival and remained sadly derelict for many years. On the opposite corner was a thoroughfare, with a local bar opposite a garden nursery, where East ‘D’ Street ran straight out of town, going west into the rolling hills and turning into more of a road as it crossed from Sonoma County into Marin County. After several curvy miles, commuters to the ranch would make a left turn into the small village of Nicasio, past a baseball field, an old church, and into a sharp turn—where at least once a year someone would be driving too fast and would smash through the fence into the field beyond. Another left took you onto Lucas Valley Road. (Lucas Valley Road isn’t named after George Lucas. In the 1880s, rancher John Lucas inherited much of the valley as a wedding present from his uncle, an earlier settler, and the road was named after him. Besides, the Marin County Board of Supervisors would have collectively thrown themselves off a cliff rather than name something after George Lucas. More on that later...)

My first few weeks, I drove alone over those backroads to Skywalker Ranch (later, I’d carpool). Motoring along the slow curves of the Lucas Valley thruway, with the sun’s rays filtering through the high branches of redwood trees on either side, like light cascading through dark-green stained-glass windows, I was pretty sure I’d be fired. Because of the many identical-looking turns on the two-lane road, I also had an irrational fear of driving past the ranch entrance. Luckily, a bank of rusty mailboxes on an old trestle, and the sudden absence of telephone or electrical wires overhead—Lucas had paid to put them underground, to enhance the natural setting—warned me each day that I was approaching.

Passing through a heavy wooden gate that swung open automatically, I’d go by the kiosk and wave to one of the ranch’s Fire Department. Security was light, or seemed that way (there were rumors of cameras hidden in fake rocks up on the hills). Lucas hadn’t hired an outside company to protect his facility; Fire Department members, some of whom had worked there for many years, felt like part of the ranch family, or the “dysfunctional family,” as some called it.

I’d prefer “benevolently strange family,” because it did function. One sign of its oddity was the etiquette involved in slowly driving past the ranch’s white two-story Victorian-style Main House, which was more like a country manor: We had to take the far edge of the house’s circular driveway, passing round a magnolia tree, for we’d been told that taking the closer rim over the paving stones would disturb Lucas, who was busy in his second-floor office revising the script. What the difference of about 20 feet would make, I couldn’t tell, but I’d heard that offenders had been warned off before.

Another sign of strangeness occurred on my third or fourth day when I received an inter-office phone call from an assistant who said she couldn’t read my memo. I walked over to see what was wrong, only to realize that she, perhaps still stoned from the ’70s, was trying to read it upside down. The ranch was at once mellow and high-strung, an eccentric place. Although I was certainly an oddball, I didn’t know if I’d make it, and for the first few days and weeks woke up regularly at 3 a.m. in a cold sweat.

The Rise of Skywalker Ranch

After the phenomenal success of *Star Wars* in 1977, Lucas the Utopian had been born. Surprisingly to him, he suddenly had the means to realize his dreams and ideas. Having already tried with Coppola to create an artistic hub with American Zoetrope, Lucas could go all out and build the ultimate filmmaking think-tank, a place where he and his friends would be free and productive, far from Hollywood phoniness and urban

distractions; a place where a film editor, cooped up and confined for hours in a dark room, could step out to hear the birds and feel the sunshine.

Through his company Parkway Properties, Lucas made his first major land purchase in 1978: the 1,700 acre Bull Tail Ranch (sometimes written as “Bulltail”), which had been owned by the Soares family. More acreage followed, and, by 1980, he and his wife, Marcia, had initiated an immense building and landscaping project under the auspices of the Skywalker Development Company, which had construction and interior design groups, an art glass studio, and a team of architects from two firms. During the big push, as many as 80 or so craftspeople lived onsite. The Lucases spared no expense, overseeing and planning everything down to doorknobs and window hinges. The story of the building of Skywalker Ranch could easily be the subject of its own book and probably will be one day.

Over the years the Lucases also bought several buildings around their Parkway House office in San Anselmo (they turned Parkway into their own home in 1979). Some of these new properties became rentals and some workplaces, such as the ones on Ancho Vista Avenue and Redwood Road. In September or October 1985, the ranch was finally ready, and Lucas moved Lucasfilm operations—marketing, publishing, licensing, legal, administrative, and his office staff—from those scattered sites into Skywalker. But he never, ever stopped making improvements.

During my own first few months at Skywalker, I saw land on the crest of a hill being prepared for hundreds of olive trees to be planted, while, inside the Main House, carpenters and masons tunneled vertically from the roof to the foundations, in order to install a chimney and a fireplace in the entryway. Those who’d been with the company longer often referred to Lucas as “Mr. Winchester,” after the rifle heiress, Sarah Winchester, who had kept craftspeople busy on her Victorian mansion for almost 40 years with constant changes and alterations.

Lucas’s goal had been to unite all of his moviemaking subsidiaries in one place, but Skywalker Ranch was zoned for only about 300 employees. The 1,000 or so members of ILM therefore stayed put in the industrial zone of San Rafael, about 25 minutes away, where they could also continue to make use of hazardous materials and explosives. The videogame branch, LucasArts, also kept its 350 or so people in a nondescript office building about 15 minutes east, next to the 101 freeway, for lack of space.

My first week, five other new hires and I were given an orientation tour. Our day started in the Breakfast Room of the Main House, the exterior wall of which was glass; its interior painted an airy pale blue. Surrounded by farm-like buffets and cabinets topped with wicker baskets, we sat at a long country-style wooden table facing Lucasfilm President Gordon Radley, who met with new hires as a kind of tradition. A graduate of Harvard Law School and a Peace Corps volunteer, he’d joined the company in 1985 as Deputy General Counsel. He had a round, light-red face, thinning hair, and spoke frankly, telling us that we were standing on the shoulders of those who came before us.

“You don’t really deserve this place,” he said.
We would have to earn our stripes.

One of Radley’s primary responsibilities at the time was overseeing construction of Big Rock Ranch, which was going up on the other side of the hill behind the Main House (Lucas had bought that adjoining 1,117-acre ranch in 1980). Behind schedule, Big Rock would be a sister complex, but with a different entrance on Lucas Valley Road, about five minutes east of Skywalker. A third project still farther east was

even then in the planning stages, Grady Ranch (1,053 more acres, which Lucas had purchased back in 1985 and 1986, in two deals).

Once we finished eating and Radley had learned a little about each of us, a guide from HR took us through the interior of the 50,000-square-foot Main House, pointing out its ornate redwood moldings, much of the wood reclaimed. On the wall of the Art Nouveau living room, over the fireplace, was a Norman Rockwell painting of three workers caring for a young, injured woman; she lies on the ground, her head supported by a kindly man, a composition meant to invite comparisons with a religious moment, a kind of WPA Pietà. The next room was dominated by piano, recovered from a girls' school, which, our guide told us, composer John Williams played on occasion. Elsewhere was a stained-glass Stickley lamp and a Francisco Zuniga sculpture of a mother nursing her child.

On the Main House's wraparound front porch were wicker armchairs that provided a breath-taking view of the inner, pleasant valley, a Shangri-La surrounded by rolling hills, brown in the summer, green in the winter. To the right and down the hill, was the Technical "Tech" Building, made from something like 360,000 reclaimed red bricks, tons of stone, and sandblasted wood, modeled on an 1880s-era winery (but also meant, I believe, to have looked like it was expanded later on).

"The most expensive building per square-foot west of the Mississippi," our guide said. "Home of Skywalker Sound."

The Tech Building faced Ewok Lake, where the more courageous employees sometimes swam. Behind the building was an underground factory, hidden from view, where immense machinery powered postproduction technology and climate controls. Inside, our group was ushered past sound studios with Art Deco colors, designs, and armchairs provided with the latest technology. In a spacious cafeteria, where cushioned chairs on wheels could roll easily on a polished stone floor, we were directed to a large illustrated poster of Humphrey Bogart in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*.

"Any idea why that's here?" our guide asked. "Because Bogart's wide-brimmed hat inspired Indy's." Beyond the cafeteria was a recording studio big enough to house a symphony. Upstairs was the reception area of Skywalker Sound where Academy Awards and other honors were behind glass: Oscars for *Jurassic Park*, *Titanic*, *Forrest Gump*, and others. The whole immaculate space was another adventure in Art Deco—Fred Astaire in tails and Ginger Rogers in her white feathered gown would not have looked out of place—which was in turn dominated by a poster of Jean-Luc Goddard's 1965 film, *Alphaville*.

"Why is that one here?" our guide asked rhetorically. "Because *Alphaville* inspired *THX 1138*, George Lucas's first feature-length film, and the patented sound system is called 'THX'."

Clearly, the posters were telling a story. Going back downstairs, we passed a truly enormous one—around eight by ten feet—for Sergei Eisenstein's *October*, a fitting reminder of the Russian director and cinematic pioneer who championed the two dominant postproduction arts practiced in the Tech Building: film editing and sound design.

Our next stop was down a short flight of stairs to the 300-seat Stag Theater. I can't adequately describe the mind-blowing beauty of this movie house, the brainchild of corporate technical director Tom Holman, who masterminded it using a "crossover" technology, which apparently combined different disciplines (indeed, he is the real reason for the "THX" moniker: his initials, "T" and "H," plus "X" for "crossover").

A veteran sound technician and “audio guru,” Holman had been lured to Lucasfilm by its promise in 1980. “Here was the first movie studio to be built from the ground up since the Thirties,” he told Mel Lambert in August 1996. “We had a music-scoring stage, mix-to-picture, sound, editorial—a typical full-function film post-production facility... I got the opportunity to examine the whole film-making process.”

Back in 1992, the Stag Theater had been used as the flagship THX demonstration center, referred to as “arguably the most acoustically perfect theater in the world.” Those who wanted to be certified to sell the Lucasfilm Home THX Audio System were treated to a day-long seminar (and then some), which included a talk given by Holman in which he explained how movie sound was done—Foley, afx, bfx, dialogue—and who then used the idol theft scene out of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* to show how sound was built up. (In 1992, a Home THX System ran about \$10,000.)

The point of our visit was similar, to make plain the importance of sound design. They did this by showing us, several times, not *Raiders*, but the same 30 seconds from the D-Day landing in the more recent *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), for which Sky Sound had won two Academy Awards (Best Sound and Best Sound Effects Editing). First we saw the sequence, in which Captain Miller (Tom Hanks) and troops run onto the beach amidst incredible carnage, without any sound at all; then with only Hank’s breathing; then with only single gunshots and ricochets; next, artillery and rapid-fire machine guns; then shouting, groaning, and screaming (if I remember correctly). When the many tracks were finally played at once, at brain-shattering volume, the theater was filled with a multilayered audio harmony of machines, pain, and story. We were convinced.

“Sound is 50 percent of the picture,” our guide said. “That’s the motto here.”

(The sound volume in Stag Theater was an ongoing struggle between management and the projectionists. The latter wanted their state-of-the-art audio system played as loud as human ears could stand—or louder—while others wanted a more reasonable level. After a preview of *Finding Nemo* there, a movie for kids!, my ears rang for days...)

Next was the Fire Department, which had its own Skywalker Ranch trucks; we saw the outside of what looked like a barn, but which was really the art, costume, and film archives (we didn’t go inside), and were shown the Inn Complex, massive stone and wood edifices, where guests could sleep over or have a long stay in one of the 26 suites (one-, two-, and three-bedrooms) named after Dorothy Parker, Ansel Adams, Frank Lloyd Wright (complete with a framed drawing by that genius), and others, or hang out in the living room or “miner’s lounge.”

Our group walked back up the hill, passing beneath a canopy of redwood trees, across a bridge over a creek, past the vineyards (you could buy Skywalker wine at the company store) to the four multi-storied brown-shingle houses behind the Main House, our offices, connected by foot paths, yet separated discretely by large native trees: the Carriage House (licensing and publishing; style, 1915 Barn), the Brook House (marketing and PR; style, 1913 Craftsman), the Stable House (once the home of Lucasfilm Games; human resources and training), and the Gate House (legal and finance; style, 1870 Victorian/Craftsman).

Over the years I’d come to the conclusion that Skywalker Ranch and its ancillary works were Lucas’s most grandiose project, his equivalent to Disney’s studio, Disneyland, or “Hearst Castle,” possibly his most beautiful, cherished composition, a multi-vista painting in four dimensions—and, while at its peak, the creative hub for hundreds, something he’d imagined for years and spent decades and a sizable fortune making a reality.

Into this thriving, bustling community, I arrived and somehow managed to keep my job for the first few weeks. Except for the orientation tour, there was no other training or explanations on how things were done. I was given a workload of about 15 books to edit—DK's Visual Dictionary and Cross-Section books; the last of the Random House *Star Wars* kids books; Scholastic's Boba Fett series; etc.—and expected to perform.

Life at Skywalker I: Lunch

(This is the first of several asides, in which make an attempt to describe life at Skywalker.)

Of the four places you could eat at the ranch, the “fanciest” was the Main House dining room. With about eight tables, it was almost a restaurant, with a staff of waiters and cooks. During cold weather, a fire crackled in a stone hearth. The kitchen was supplied with vegetables from the ranch's organic garden (created by Alice Waters of Chez Panisse fame), and Kobe beef was served, at times, from the ranch's Wagyu cattle, which grazed on the hillsides. There was a vegetarian option every day.

A year after my arrival, the restaurant became a buffet. Once, when it was crowded, George stood there with his tray looking for a table. After an awkward moment or two, during which he couldn't decide if he should sit with others, and no one else could decide if they should invite him over, he exited the dining room and found a table elsewhere.

(Note: It was relaxed enough during those early years that if, say, the deserts weren't all eaten, you could come by at around 3 p.m., and grab one for free; no one wanted to waste food. Mornings, anyone could go into the kitchen and use the cappuccino machine.)

Once a week during summers, the chef would fire up a big stone BBQ grill outside the Main House, where they'd cook ribs, corn, and beans, and the like, which you could eat at tables on the back porch. Attached to the Main House via a covered walkway was the Solarium, which had a soup, salad, and sandwich bar. This was where those in a hurry could purchase a quick lunch and sit beneath a glass dome and leafy trees, whose trunks descended into the floor and earth below; there was also a small exterior balcony with a table and chairs that one had to share with persistent bees.

The Tech Building had its own cafeteria, the largest on the ranch, which featured a more southwest cuisine. (If you carpooled more than 10 or 12 times a month, you received about 50 “LucasBucks”; 20 carpools meant more bucks. Because the cafeterias were already subsidized—you could eat for around \$6—these bucks were enough to lunch several times a month for free.)

The Fitness Center was the most casual and perhaps the most popular spot, because it had a grill and served hamburgers, grilled cheese sandwiches, tuna melts, and daily specials, with French Fries. Here you'd find those directors and producers who were staying at the Skywalker Ranch Inn, while doing postproduction work on their films at Sky Sound.

Next: Into the Maelstrom

See the whole interview with Tom Holman here:

http://www.mediaandmarketing.com/13Writer/Interviews/MIX.Tom_Holman.html

The Rise and Fall of Star Wars, Blog #6

7/3/2017

13 Comments



Into the Maelstrom

Our small publishing department was in the attic of the Carriage House (Lucy's office was on the groundfloor). The rest of licensing occupied the two floors below, having moved over from the Brook House in 1987. Apart from myself, there was long-time editor Sue Rostoni, who handled the novels (and eventually the comic books), and Chris Cerasi and Michelle Vuckovich, who started about a month before me. Everyone would stash their cars in the underground parking lot and come up through a basement, which, intriguingly, housed a Foley stage and some sort of sound editing/mixing board. Hidden technology was one of the themes at the ranch, though in this case it was also a matter of necessity: At Lucas's request, Foley had been moved out of the Tech Building to make room for the first digital sound studio, which Ben Burtt and his crew had used for Episode I (later, Foley would be moved back into the basement of the Tech Building).

Up a flight of stairs from Foley, licensing was made up of about 35 men and women in offices or at desks in an open-floor plan. What I found to be a funny, but endearing aspect of my new working environment was that nothing—well, hardly anything—was designed for business. Some of the managers were business-like, even corporate, but the place itself felt like a home.

"The Main House was built by a retired sea captain," Jo Donaldson, the ranch's long-time librarian, told me.

Jo and had taken over years before from the first ranch librarian/archivist, Debbie Fine, and we were standing in their abode, one of the more beautiful libraries in the world, the jewel of the Main House. A stained-glass dome capped a fantastic chamber dominated by a spiral redwood staircase to a mezzanine. Behind her were framed photographs of the ranch cats. Always patient and helpful, Jo pointed to a bank of nautical instruments embedded in dark wood paneling, and I recognized a barometer.

Around us, bookshelves were crammed with titles reflecting the subjects and needs of Lucas's films: furniture and costume design; world history, anthropology, psychology, evolution, and religion; but also UFO-ology and esoteric subjects, such as the Nazi's use of occult magic. Anyone at Lucasfilm could check out books if they had a legitimate business reason for doing so. Jo and one or two assistants at the library also provided research and reference services to outside clients (for example, the productions of *J. Edgar*, *Lincoln*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Iron Man*, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Moulin Rouge*, *Chicago*, etc.)

"What about the Carriage House and the Gate House?" I asked.

"George told the architects that the four houses behind the Main House were built by the sea captain's children. That's why their architectural styles are different from the Victorian style here. One of the grandchildren built the Tech Building." (I also heard that this son, or grandson, was a rebel, who planted the vineyard and went into the wine business.)

Above the library fireplace was an original Maxfield Parrish painting. Jo told me that when Lucas had first revealed his showplace to Steven Spielberg, the latter had remarked that it was a little hard to see the painting. That same afternoon workers installed recessed lights in the ceiling.

"George wrote down a whole story," Jo added, "to explain to everyone involved, the builders and architects, why one building was a certain style, or different from another."

I never saw his written story, but it was consistent with his way of working, which often integrated history, art, fairy tales, and family sagas. Even many of the ranch's bathrooms were like those you might find in a house of the period, with claw-foot tubs and wooden cabinets. Lucas figured that the tubs and showers would be useful if anyone had to work overnight.

The unintended humor of the ranch's non-utilitarian character meant that us four editors in the attic had nice oak desks, perfect for typewriters, but not our hulking PCs and wide keyboards that hogged their surface space. Whenever illustrated pages came in, I'd go into the hallway and sit on the floor to lay them out. Nor did we have file cabinets. Instead, we had a complex system of loose papers piled high on a shelf. Strong winds were dangerous, but we had to keep the windows open, because people were never meant to stay nine or ten hours a day in that attic: we sweated through the summer and shivered during the winter. During the former season's very hot days, the attic's roughly 15-foot-long glass wall converted our workspace into a greenhouse, in which we were the desiccated orchids.

It didn't help that, in my enthusiasm to sign up for everything offered at the ranch, I wound up playing intramural softball, which I'd never played before, and dislocated my knee. In the second game I had to be rescued by the Fire Department and bandaged up. I was on crutches for the next few weeks, hobbling up and down the Carriage House staircase.

It was in this sorry condition that I made a discovery: As the newly hired nonfiction editor, I was in charge of behind-the-scenes books—and my first “mission” was to discuss a recently submitted manuscript with Prequel Trilogy Producer Rick McCallum, which was the equivalent of drawing the short straw. McCallum was widely feared, for he was volatile. In some quarters, he was ... not liked. Former assistants had hidden beneath their desks when he was on one of his rampages.

My first day during lunch in the Main House dining room, at the table next to ours, I'd spotted McCallum with Lucas, composer John Williams, and actress Carrie Fisher. I noted then that Rick resembled physically a more charming Quasimodo. He'd let himself go a little, but had the hunched large shoulders and upper body of an Olympic swimmer, which he'd nearly been*. He'd also been a daring young producer in the UK, though American, who was written up by Italian tabloids as having an affair with actress Elizabeth Taylor on one of his first film experiences as an assistant director on location in Rome. (*The Driver's Seat*, 1974; Rick's step-father, Michael York, wrote that the tabloids were in error.)

Apart from his reputation, I had another problem. Upon reading the manuscript, although it was a solid piece of journalism, it wasn't my cup of tea. Its author, however, was a friend of McCallum's. This last fact was related to me by someone who hastened to add that I was, “screwed.”

I sent the pages over to Rick with a note asking him to let me know when he was ready to talk. About a week later I was summoned by his assistant, Ardees Rabang, who, like Radar on *M.A.S.H.*, often knew what Rick wanted before he did (and wasn't intimidated by him either). Rabang always made three copies of every document: one for Rick, one for the files, and one for when Rick lost the first one.

The day of our rendezvous, I climbed the wide, carpeted, curved staircase of the Main House—something out of *Gone with the Wind*—up to McCallum's office, not sure what I was going to say. On the second floor, to the left were Jane Bay's office, that of her assistant, Anne Merrifield, and Lucas's suite, neither of which I'd yet to glimpse. This was my first trip to the inner-sanctum, off limits to anyone without good reason or an invitation. To the right of the staircase was Rick's lair, so producer and director had easy access to each other. In the anteroom, I was told to wait. McCallum was on the phone. I was apprehensive, but felt that he had been type-cast. McCallum couldn't be all one way. No one was.

After about 30 minutes, Ardees showed me in. I saw various awards on shelves; on the fireplace mantel a few high-end *Star Wars* replicas; on the coffee-table, assorted foreign cinema magazines—and books. Several art and photography books, which was reassuring.

Rick was behind a massive desk on another call. I sat down opposite. That day and on many subsequent occasions, he was not shy about letting it all hang out, no matter who might be on the other end, no matter what business was being discussed, no matter how angry or beseeching he might be. “Honey, I know...,” he was saying (anyone could be “Honey”). “Just help us out... yeah, I know.”

He hung up, looked at me, and said, “The book's pretty boring, isn't it.”

“Yes, it is.”

“What can we do about it?”

“Nothing,” I said. “It's too late. But for the next one, we could tell the story of production, talk about the real drama of making a movie, follow it from day one up to the release of the film. Preproduction, on the sets, editing—everything.”

“Okay,” Rick smiled. “Let's do it.”

Next: I Was a Secret Mole-Man

* See Michael York's autobiography, *Accidentally on Purpose*. His book is a good read, too.

And please note, as I mentioned before: This blog is about my time at Lucasfilm, from October 1, 2001, to December 31, 2015. As such, though I'll try to be objective, my observations are no doubt my subjective views of these years and people, not any clinical "truth."

The Rise and Fall of Star Wars, Blog #7

7/4/2017

7 Comments



Note: In honor of July 4, seems like a good idea to post this one, which includes a bit about Lucasfilm's July 4 picnics (below, after main text)...

I Was a Secret Mole-Man

Rick and I decided that I would find a writer who would become part of the on-set team. Because that hiring process would take a while, I'd begin taking notes at the first Episode III preproduction art meetings, for the author to use later on. To learn the ropes, I'd attend Episode II dailies at ILM. It happened fast.

That's how my second, more interesting job at Lucasfilm commenced, which I owe to Rick. We'd be at odds later, but at that moment, the reputed ogre of Lucasfilm had transformed himself into my mercurial fairy godfather.

When I told Lucy what we planned to do, the kind of book I wanted to make, she spoke to Howard Roffman about it. A small, careful man, with grey hair cut short, Howard was Lucasfilm's éminence gris: not only the head of licensing, the company's cash cow and economic lynchpin, but also influential in other spheres. Having performed in various critical capacities since 1980, and having come to know Lucas well, he had a say on many topics.

I wasn't sure how they'd react, thinking I may have overstepped my bounds, but he and Lucy went along with it. (Subsequent experience would teach me that no one was going to go up against Rick. Also, the wants and needs of Production trumped those of every other department.) However, I was told to keep it quiet. For a while, I would lead a kind of double-life at Lucasfilm. I'd take a secret staircase from the editors' attic—probably meant to be an old-fashioned maid's staircase—which allowed me to leave the Carriage House without being seen. In the Main House, a second secret staircase ascended from the library mezzanine, past framed artwork by Al Williamson, to the third floor. There, a more spacious attic stretched the entire length of the house in a kind of "H" shape, its main corridor maybe 30 yards long, opening into two rectangular spaces on either end. The concept art studio occupied one side, with drawing boards and computers somewhat cramped together. On the walls were pinned sheets of imaginative character, location and vehicle concept drawings from Episodes I and II. The other side of the attic was empty, but would be occupied later by the animatics squad.

It was on the concept art side that I attended the earliest sessions with Lucas and his two concept design supervisors, Erik Tiemens and Ryan Church, laying out in a few words his earliest ideas for *Revenge of the Sith*. A mellow native of Santa Cruz, Tiemens was also an accomplished landscape painter; Church excelled at vehicle design. Both of them were fantastic artists and fast, able to produce several conceptual artworks a day. Sculptor Robert Barnes was also there from the get-go, a kinky-haired art school graduate whose first job had been as an intern at ILM; thanks to his expressive concept sculpts he'd segued into the Prequel Trilogy art department. Not long afterward we started carpooling together.

"We might see the Wookiee planet in this one," Lucas said at an early meeting. "We might see a teenage Boba Fett."

That kind of brief was enough for them until next week. Every Friday, Lucas would come round, walking up the stairs from his office. During these sessions, I'd simply stand to the side, a human fly on the wall. Rick had told George I'd be there, but we didn't exchange a word. I'd been told that he was shy, but it felt more like focus. He was making a movie and we were along for the ride.

Life at Lucasfilm II: Parties

The words apart from "dysfunctional" that many ranch denizens used to describe Lucasfilm was, a "Mom and Pop Shop." In Lucasfilm's semi-familial, not-always-corporate way of doing things, George was Pop, and Mom might have been Marcia at one time, but had become Jane Bay, who had a significant say in how things were done, organizing the big July 4 picnics, Christmas parties and associated gifts for many years. Jane first met George at the 1974 Academy Awards, when she double-dated with Tom Pollock, Lucas's attorney, and Willard Huyck and Gloria Katz. The latter two had co-written *American Graffiti*, which had been

nominated for five Oscars that year, and would later polish the *Star Wars* script. That evening, Lucas and his friends left the award show empty handed, and Bay would remember that at the Governor's Ball George was in a "grumpy mood." Three years later, Bay became one of his very first hires, when Lucas needed a kind of office manager at Parkway House.

Since then Bay had become his executive assistant and essential to his work life. She would print up his daily schedule on a card he carried in his wallet; she would handle interoffice mail, myriad appearance requests, and a 1,001 other jobs.

Jane also masterminded, with a lot of help from Ranch Operations, the tremendous July 4 picnics, a nice tradition and open to the whole company and their families. The first picnic in 1978 had consisted of a few tables with red-checkered tablecloths and about 20 guests, and was held in the outdoor kitchen area of the deer club, in the canyon behind where the Main House would eventually be built (in days of yore, Bull Tail Ranch had an annual deer hunts and dinners). Because the picnics grew in size and their activities multiplied, by the late 1980s Bay moved the locale to the meadow in front of the Main House. In addition to volleyball, horseshoe pitches, and late-night dancing, guests such as Harrison Ford and concert promoter Bill Graham played softball. The picnic also became a regular Bay Area filmmaking community get-together, with Coppola, Zaentz, sound designer and editor Walter Murch, editor and DP Robert Dalva, director Phil Kaufman, and the usual Zoetrope veterans and old friends attending.

By 2002, the picnic was so popular that Jane had been moved it once again, this time to a larger field next to the baseball diamond where a giant tent was constructed for perhaps 50 long tables and a few thousand people, who would participate in an egg toss, a tug-of-war, a potato-sack race, as well as other games and paddle-boating on Ewok Lake. For the children, there was face-painting and pony rides. The ranch supplied the main courses—BBQ pork, hamburgers, hot dogs, and corn and beans—while we brought homemade salads. For desert, an ice-cream truck always had long, happy lines. Once I was with my family sitting under a tree to escape the intense heat, when a volunteer strolled over to offer us slices of apple pie, for which we were very grateful.

The Christmas parties had a similar growth trajectory. They started as small dinners at Parkway and the Main House, then grew over the years to about 400 people at the Carriage Room at the Palace Hotel in SF. People would dress up (ILMer Rose Duignan attended one in an 18th Century—style gown and wig). Another took place in the Tech Building, with a Dickensian theme. By the time I attended a Christmas party in 2001, a whole division of the company had worked for months to prepare a warehouse the size of a Boeing airplane hangar south of Mission, the only space big enough for the two thousand employees and their plus ones. "I don't know anybody at the parties anymore," George told his old accountant Richard Tong.

Each party had elaborate themes, such as 1970s disco, World Travel, or Riverboat Gambling. One year, we could ride an actual indoor roller coaster; another time there was a rollerskating rink (where I nearly killed myself); employees could play with fake money at poker and blackjack tables; there were over the years photo booths, arcade machines, carnival tents, dancing, various bands, guest performers, even long, thick snakes. At these more adult affairs, alcohol flowed and the volume was often deafening, so Genevieve and I usually left early. But it was fun.

Lucas would also give Christmas presents to Lucasfilm employees. Bay would plan these and they, too, were often elaborate: for instance, a Western-themed wooden box, with the initials "SR" branded into its side, containing a Western dime-novel, leather coasters, and cowboy coffee.

ILM's Halloween party was also a tradition, held on its soundstage, where countless effects moments had been filmed. Because awards were given for best group costume, best individual costume, etc., model makers would often go all out. I saw one arrive with a functioning carousel built around him, actually revolving with multicolored lights flickering, music playing, and horses going up and down. The prizes were fantastic, too, because sponsors sought favor with the facility. The top three might go to the experts, but if you could come up with something clever, the panel of judges might give you, say, sixth prize. A friend of mine walked away with some sort of Dolby sound system worth thousands of dollars. Those who wanted to compete could shuffle across a runway stage.

All of the above was part of the fabric of Lucasfilm, the "Mom and Pop Shop" that was also a billion-dollar corporation.

Next: The Rise of George Lucas Books

The Rise and Fall of Star Wars, Blog #8

7/5/2017

10 Comments



Postcard of SF Bay Area; Skywalker/Lucasfilm was across bridge (GG) in foreground to left, in Marin County (from the 1970s to 2005).

The Rise of George Lucas Books

Early on, my boss, Lucy Wilson, told me that George wanted to start up his own publishing imprint, and that she and I would be working on what would be called “George Lucas Books.” His personal imprint would focus on non-*Star Wars*-related books, on subjects that interested him.

Our kick-off meeting was in the Main House conference room, where an almost life-sized Norman Rockwell preparatory drawing (a “cartoon”) for an oil painting of a teacher and her young class hung on one wall; a Renoir print of a little girl with pencil and paper was on another; and a painting by an artist whose signature I couldn’t make out showed kids running out of a one-room schoolhouse at the end of the day, free at last to play. Overhead was a chandelier of warm amber glass, shaped like an oblong shield.

Rick McCallum walked in, along with production controller Kathryn Ramos, and a young documentary filmmaker. Lucy and I sat at one end of the table. George arrived and I was introduced (even though I’d been to several art meetings, this book meeting was part of my normal job at Lucasfilm, so more formal; yes, it was a little weird). He sat at the other end of the table, and said that he wanted to do a book about the Northern California moviemaking community.

"This is something like *The Films of San Francisco Studios*," Lucas said. "I'd like it to be categorized by studio, which is to say, Zoetrope, Lucasfilm, Fantasy Films, Pixar, and maybe PDI. It's about our struggle to actually get these movies made; PDI also has some great struggles. These movies, no one actually wanted to make any of them."

Accompanying the book would be a complementary documentary made by the young filmmaker, so we'd share assets and interviews. In a year or so we'd launch it and the book together to make a big splash at some big festival.

"Hollywood hasn't picked up on it yet, still," Lucas went on. "Down south, there's a whole development hell they've created. The studio executives get involved, and too many people get involved—but we don't do it that way up here. We make movies about more personal subjects."

Lucas was in the mood to talk. I'd learn over the years that when he was absorbed by a subject, he could talk for a good twenty minutes in an energetic, uninterrupted patter. That afternoon was the first time I experienced it. His eyes lit up behind his black-rimmed glasses. In the early days, he'd been a skinny, beardless (then bearded) youth with a raw energy; now he was heavier with a thick neck, but was still a vibrant channel.

He told us how he and Coppola had been lured to the Bay Area by such solo moviemaking acts as John Korty and Bruce Conner, by the underground avant-garde film movements of the 1960s. By 2001, insiders would tell me that the SF film community had become more of a dark and grungy experience in dank office buildings, while, for obvious reasons, "Lucasland," was where one reveled in "milk and honey." There was some jealousy between the two camps, Coppola and Lucas, while Saul Zaentz's Berkeley operation was another node, with its own reputation for making "cool" independent films, such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) and, more recently, *The English Patient* (1996). For many film and sound editors, postproduction experts and tech "gypsies," the three filmmaking centers of Lucas, Coppola, and Zaentz had made up a triangle of employment for decades, which triangle had later been augmented by Pixar and PDI. Lucas then explained the subjects of his next books. He wanted one about the reality of film budgets and record-keeping; he wanted to pull back the veil on studio accounting, long a source of anguish for anyone without gross points, because films very rarely made a profit on paper. Another book would analyze the causes of death through statistics. He also was considering a book that would contrast the different ways of giving birth and raising children around the world, an idea inspired by his home assistant, Sarita Patel. He concluded by circling back to the project that was closest to his heart, Bay Area filmmaking. "Today we're still in trouble," George said. "They're still saying we're not part of the United States. We're in a kind of time warp here, still in the '70s in terms of filmmaking. We still think of ourselves as independent."

It was an interesting hour or so, and I'm pretty sure I didn't say much if anything. But his last comment reminded me of my old neighbor Chick Callenbach and his *Ecotopia*. I was on familiar ground.

Big Scribbles

Lucy and I then went about trying to find the right authors for each title. In order to learn more about SF filmmakers and potential writers, we had lunch with Tom Luddy, one of the co-founders of the Telluride Film Festival, who'd been around since the early days, when he and Alice Waters (Chez Panisse restaurant founder) held salon-like dinners for visiting and local filmmakers.

We met him outside the Beaux-Arts Flatiron building known as “The Sentinel,” which joins the corners of Columbus Avenue, Kearny Street, and Jackson Street in San Francisco’s North Beach. Coppola had bought the magnificent multi-storied trapezoid, which was clad in white tile and copper (that had aged green), to be the second home of American Zoetrope back in 1973, after he’d had to shut the doors of the first Zoetrope home on Folsom.

In fact we met Coppola there, too, briefly. He was sitting at an outside table, drinking a glass of wine, no doubt made from the grapes of his Napa Valley vineyard. With Luddy, we then crossed the street and ate in a local Chinese restaurant. Unfortunately, he didn’t help much.

Back in the publishing attic of the Carriage House at Skywalker, I balanced Lucas’s new titles with my regular editorial workload, which now included a coffee-table book on his professional career, to be published by Abrams Books, a sequel to the *Creative Impulse*. So far I’d only shaken George’s hand and observed him in the art department; I didn’t know much about him or his work beside the obvious tropes, yet this title would be very much on his radar. So I set out to watch everything he’d done, from his student shorts to the more obscure films he’d produced (like *Powaqqatsi*, 1988), to every episode of *Young Indy*. Fortunately the ranch library had everything.

After quite a few preliminaries, such as obtaining an approved list of interviewees, we selected Marcus Hearn to be the writer, and he, after a quick visit to the States during which he talked with Lucas, quickly got to it in his London home.

Working on *The Cinema of George Lucas* was fun and nerve-racking. We had ample time, a patient publisher, and were able to refine each spread of the book (a spread is a two-page layout). My partner in this endeavor was art director Iain Morris, whom I suspected to have grown taller since he’d interviewed me. He hired a designer named Scott Erwert, and the three of us spent hours going over the size and placement of each image in each chapter. The anxiety producing part was getting Lucas’s approval for the text, which was news to me, so the process had a few ups and downs and ups.

Another designer named Martin Venezky helped us to design the book’s cover, and wondered aloud if Lucasfilm had any archival documents that could serve as illustrations and/or inspiration. I thought this was a great idea, and asked Jane Bay if George had any handwritten notes from the early days. She told me to come over. In the office opposite hers—“The Green Room,” a waiting area with an original Alphonse Mucha on the wall—she handed me a manila folder. Inside were George’s first efforts to write the crawl for *Star Wars*, in pencil, along with his original treatment from 1973, and other notes he’d made on yellow legal-pad paper. I had scans made of them, which went on to feature in the book. By including Lucas’s early graffiti, by engaging in a kind of pseudo-epigraphy, we were utilizing in the ghetto of licensed publishing a practice that was usually reserved for the more rarefied world of art history and Academic presses. Yes, licensed books generally occupy the bottom rung of the publishing ladder. And rightfully so, for licensed titles are mostly an extension of a film studio’s marketing/PR departments, which usually results in horribly made books devoid of any real content. Your average movie tie-in is nothing more than a few artworks and/or movie stills, chosen by anyone from a co-producer to an assistant hired the week before, accompanied by quotes from cast and crew saying how much they love each other. Or even, no text at all.

There was an advantage, however, to working in a publishing arena that others disdained so completely. It was liberating. No one paid any attention to what we were doing (at first). And at Lucasfilm I thought we might be able to break the mold. George was interested in books, clearly, and Rick wanted to say what making a movie was really like (though he’d often lament that we could never tell the *real* real story). Moreover, during

that early period, getting a sense of Lucas's personality during art department reviews, and in the launch of his own imprint, I thought he wouldn't mind at least trying to tell an honest behind-the-scenes story.

Life at Lucasfilm III: More Perks and Day Care

Years later George would tell me that you either "Rule by fear or by love." With his mid-sized company of 2,000 souls, he was at least attempting to do the latter, though really it was a mixture of the two. Like anyplace, there were those who "didn't feel the love," those with their own hang-ups and fears, and "love" is a tricky word. Lucas rarely went out of his way to talk to his employees. It wasn't his style, and he was occupied by more pressing matters. On the other hand, he was rarely dismissive or disrespectful (I never saw it, though some have complained to me about this or that slight. Any new hire was told not to bother Lucas, or risk being fired, but that seemed to me like common sense).

His "love" was exhibited in broad strokes, in the institutions, policies, and traditions of Lucasfilm begun by himself and Marcia Lucas, though I can't vouch for LucasArts or ILM, where things might have been different (they had their own presidents and managers, and the visual effects facility was unionized, which distanced them).

An army travels on its stomach, and, as mentioned in a previous blog, Skywalker had in its heyday four cafeterias for about 250 people. True, we were miles away from any restaurant, but four seemed generous to me. (Rancho Nicasio, about 10 minutes away, was the closest.)

Membership for the Fitness Center's facilities, weight room and pool and sports teams, was nearly free (\$50 or \$70/year, I can't remember). Later, Lucas added a tennis court. There was an indoor racquetball court and basketball court, the latter of which doubled for a pickup volleyball game twice a week. Ardees Rabang, Iain Morris, and I played; so did several folks from Sky Sound, including Ben Burt. It was mildly competitive, but mostly comedic. David Anderman, in legal, who will figure largely in our story to come, was the most enamored of spiking. One thing most of us were good at was injuring ourselves. (Burt decided to make a mini-documentary about our escapades, one segment of which featured our most recent debacles, in which I had a cameo with a broken bone in my foot.)

Lucasfilm provided a comparatively liberal health care package for employees—but also unusual perks, such as an annual yearbook; a frozen turkey to take home on Thanksgiving; bring-your-daughter-to-work day; and cruises on the "Seawalker," an approximately 30-foot-long sailboat that the Lucases had purchased early on and supplied with a two-person crew. Genevieve and I, with another couple, took what I believe was its last voyage around the bay, before it was moth-balled.

Moreover, Skywalker Ranch had a day care center, a very innovative idea supplied by ILMer Rose Duignan—so new mothers or fathers could go down the hill and see their children several times a day. Overall, it felt to me like HR and its associated operations were actually focused on creating a benevolent workplace. Every Saturday morning, there were family screenings of new movies in a Marin County theater; T-shirts, posters, and DVDs of the films were given away periodically; and they organized a unique event my first weekend there: a huge product giveaway in the parking lot of ILM.

In a lottery, I drew a low number. Those of us in that first group were each given a shopping bag and told we could also take two large items. All groups, which overlapped, had about twelve minutes. I'm not a collector or anything, but I do have nephews and nieces and neighbors (my daughters weren't really interested), and it was great: We weaved our way through a labyrinth whose six-foot walls were made from actual *Star Wars*

products piled high, but constructed in such a way that you could take things without the whole thing collapsing (though maybe it did later on). Even after the company feeding frenzy, there was so much left over that truckloads of toys were delivered afterward to various North Bay charities.

I don't want to paint too rosy a picture, as there were always tensions and problems behind the scenes, but the effort to create a good place to work was evident. Things would change, yet during my first few years, and long before, Lucasfilm was operating at a very high level of benign Mom-and-Pop corporatism.

Next (Friday): Attack of the Bald Clone

The Rise and Fall of Star Wars, Blog #9

7/7/2017

14 Comments



Opening of one of Lucas's student films. The word means "freedom."

Modern Times

My behind-the-scenes work included going down to Industrial Lights & Magic for the visual effects dailies, on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Lucas had already wrapped principal photography on Episode II and was in the midst of postproduction. ILM was deep into about a two thousand shots. The trickiest involved a climactic duel between Count Dooku (Christopher Lee) and Yoda, who was going to be digitally animated for the first time instead of being puppeteered by Frank Oz (who would still supply the voice).

Their fight looked iffy. My first day at Lucasfilm I'd been given a VHS tape of the rough cut to watch on a small TV—please note: this was my first day, but they shared what is often jealously guarded on film productions—a complete view of a work-in-progress. When the story got to the Yoda/Dooku confrontation, all I could see was a tiny wisp of a creature darting and cartwheeling around a old man flailing with a lightsaber. Everyone, even animation director Rob Coleman, was a little worried about it.

But on my first visits to ILM, the atmosphere was relaxed, congenial, the place I'd seen in the pages of Thomas G. Smith's book come to life. As hundreds if not thousands of online and magazine articles have observed, ILM did not advertise itself; there was no sign outside. Instead, its modest entrance was hidden behind a plain glass office door with "Kerner Optical" marked on it. If it had been otherwise, there would have been an endless flow of fans, visual effects aficionados, and cinéphiles on pilgrimage trying to get in.

Rick McCallum had suggested I give John Knoll a call. John was one of the visual effects supervisors (vfx supes) on the Prequel Trilogy, with a deep voice and goatee, an analytical view of life, and an abiding, deep respect for all aspects of the facility and its history. John once told me that he was concerned about today's children because they didn't want to know how everything functioned. Whereas throughout his life, he'd wanted to figure things out, including, at age 14, how movie tricks and effects were accomplished. He'd

therefore studied them at length—yet when *Star Wars* came out, he hadn't been able to name all the techniques behind its incredible shots. Consequently, on a visit to the Los Angeles area with his father in 1978, Knoll had persuaded Grant McCune, head of the model shop at that time, to let him come visit what had been the ILM facility/warehouse in Van Nuys. Knoll spent the day there. Having completed *Star Wars*, McCune, John Dykstra, and others had formed another company called Apogee and were working on the TV show *Battlestar Galactica*. Seeing these regular Joes in their ragged environment, John had reasoned, *If they can do it, so can I*. (I should add that John, with his brother, Thomas, also created Photoshop, so...) More than 20 years later, John was touring me around the 2001 iteration of the model shop, where men and women were painting, sawing, hammering, sculpting, and using machines I'd never seen before. We walked through one studio after another, once through a "door" freshly knocked through a wall with sledgehammers.

"ILM is kind of like a rabbit warren," John explained.

The facility's sprawl took up several buildings, about a whole block's worth, and it was always being re-routed, expanding and collapsing with the needs of new "shows" and changing technology.

The most radical recent development had been the gradual, then sudden emergence of digital effects. Lucas had championed them, bankrolling advances at ILM as he had at Sky Sound, since founding The Computer Division in 1979. That day, I saw glimpses of their digital pipeline while walking past folks at computers rigging animated aliens and far-out creatures. On the walls and hanging from the ceilings were remnants of previous films: an E.T., the starship *Enterprise*, model cars from *Men In Black*, a dragon, a wampa, a miniature DeLorean. I could have spent the whole day there and not seen half of it.

Like me, John had applied to ILM and been rejected. Unlike me, he'd been hired the second time he applied and had since taped the first rejection letter to his office door for anyone to read. At the small company store, I bought an ILM mug (which I still have).

The whole place was informal. Studio areas were plastered with in-jokes, drawings and more drawings, funny signs, sculptures, photos, and souvenirs from old scale-model sets. There was also an underlying current of stress. It was intense work, and deadlines and money were always tight. Yet it wasn't a public company. Ultimately ILM answered only to Lucas. So the different currents merged and overlapped, and vied for attention, but the people I met were in good spirits. Many had been there for a long time, such as model shop supervisor Lorne Peterson, a bearded, wavy-haired giant, who was almost deaf in one ear. Back in 1975, he'd had to choose between two jobs: sculpting enormous hamburgers for McDonald's, or helping out part-time on some kind of sci-fi flick at an obscure facility.

"ILM is like a miniature Florence during the Renaissance," Peterson told me, confirming what I'd felt years before.

After taking in the sights—notably, the Howard Anderson Optical Printer, a relic of the facility's celluloid years—on the way to the theater in "C" building, adjacent to the soundstage, John joined McCallum, Rob Coleman, Tiemens, Church, vfx supes Pablo Helman and Ben Snow, and others who always attended dailies, sitting near or around Lucas. A few of the core group had known each other for quite a while and had made many breakthroughs together. They would attend each other's weddings and significant birthday parties. A few were part of the original team that had changed the cinematic world and then some.

I sat nearby so I could hear what they were saying and do my job of reporting for an in-progress book I was editing. At the foot of the stadium seating, in a corner near the screen, an R2 unit had been placed next to a

totem-pole-like listing of movies for which ILM had been nominated or received an Oscar, from *Star Wars* at the bottom, rising through *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* up to 2001's nominees, *Pearl Harbor* and *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*—around 20 in all.

Dailies might include a couple dozen or more shots that Lucas would either approve or alter, not taking more than 30 to 45 minutes. A digital shot of Yoda, with his hair unattached to his head, made people laugh. But Yoda's fight shots with Dooku were slowly improving.

Seeing white-armored ghost-like troopers advancing through a multicolored haze of lazer fire, Lucas said enthusiastically, "Now *that's* the Clone Wars!"

Looking back and knowing more now, I can say that I was viewing the tail-end of a long tradition in which ideas were relatively free to flow. The atmosphere in 2001–02 was more uptight than in 1976, but still functional. Knoll or Muren or nearly anyone in the theater could offer up ideas or critiques. If it was going to slow down the process, or cost more money, they'd be at risk from McCallum, but people weren't overly shy, and Lucas listened. At least, that's the way it seemed to me. (In all these observations, the rule of *Rashomon* is in play... And note: Rick would tell me that he'd found ILM, back in the 1990s, to be mired in tradition, and that he'd had a difficult time pushing through Lucas's digital agenda, etc. Conversely, I got the feeling that some ILM folks resented Rick's forays into their areas of expertise as well—but that's a subject for those who were in the trenches.)

John Lasseter, now head of animation at Disney/Pixar, has often said that he learned from his time within Lucasfilm's embryonic Computer Division. He'd been allowed to sit in on ILM dailies during the mid-1980s and had seen how a certain give-and-take was promoted. Lasseter took those lessons across the Bay to Pixar and established a brain trust there, where competing ideas and critiques were also encouraged. Oddly enough I was being allowed to sit in, the kind of neophyte most studios would never let within a hundred yards of their dailies. Yet here, nobody cared, as long as I didn't do or say something irretrievably stupid.

At the end of one séance George and Rick stayed behind in "C" theater after dailies, and invited me to stay, too. Lucas was prepping for a series of pickups for *THX 1138*, his early film which had combined a dry sometimes twisted humor with a futuristic dystopian society, topping it off with a high-speed chase through an underground city. It had been his first feature, but in line with his shorts, another story about individual liberation and potential salvation. As he'd done with his original *Star Wars* trilogy, he wanted to add some shots digitally in order to conform to his original vision: for instance, a new shot of a vehicle racing through the metropolis.

Sitting there, watching the film go by, George said, "This is the movie most like me."

In his early days, Lucas had figured he'd go into animation or fringe documentary filmmaking. After *THX*, he'd changed tact, but, based on comments like these, I came to understand that a big part of him remained the artsy, rebellious graduate student who disdained narrative and dialogue. Indeed, after watching his shorts and while re-viewing the four *Star Wars* films for my new job, I noted aspects that are absent from run-of-the-mill blockbusters: long segments featuring only Ben Burt's sound design or John Williams' music; odd framings; emotional dislocation; and nontraditional story lines, such as showing Darth Vader as a little boy growing up—the choice and execution of which had initiated a shock wave of revulsion among certain movie-goers that continues to this day.

That day, McCallum mentioned to Lucas that Episode II, the first blockbuster to be recorded entirely with digital cameras, would also be projected digitally, as planned—but only in about 20 movie theaters, up from two (or four, George told me) for Episode I. The other 3,000 or so theaters would project the film the usual way, on celluloid. Rick's comment prompted a mini-rant. Movie-chain owners were unimaginative, risk-averse people, Lucas said, who would have to be dragged kicking and screaming into the digital age. (More on this later...)

Coda

As she did for all such events, Jane Bay supervised the company party for *Star Wars: Episode II Attack of the Clones*, whose décor was inspired by her trip to Lake Como during the location shoot. Her visit had happened to coincide with the kiss between Anakin and Padmé on a veranda, overlooking a stunning Italian garden and the lake. A photograph she took of the scene therefore became the basis for an installation at Fort Mason, at the time the biggest Lucasfilm event ever. After seeing the movie in one of the 12 theaters around the Bay Area reserved for us employees, my family and I joined about five thousand people who came to enjoy the post-release glow in the extravagant party setting. Though many at Lucasfilm were critical of the movie, at least it was over. Product was out there, all of our Episode II books, published.

During a business trip to New York City a week later, I went to a movie theater to watch the film again. I wanted to see how people were reacting to it. During the climax, when tall Dooku turned to see who had dared enter his hideout—and saw small Yoda, who pulls out his lightsaber before launching into their peripatetic fight—the audience cheered. (Likewise, more on prequels later...)

Next: Bald for THX

The Rise and Fall of Star Wars, Blog #10

7/9/2017

7 Comments



Bald, the Sequel

With Episode II out the door, Lucas took perhaps a week off and then turned full-time to Episode III, last chapter of the Prequel Trilogy. On Fridays I'd sneak out of publishing for each art department "show," which one artist described as "a gallery opening every week." George would go from left to right, scanning dozens of artworks pinned to foam core boards, making comments, perhaps choosing a drawing to be one creature or a particular city or vehicle, or approving for functions unknown. Unlike the artists, I had nothing on the line. I was there only to observe how Lucas worked creatively, building up his story, his visuals, and his ideas in concert with their concepts, generated from what he'd told them about the script, idea, or story the week before: it was a symbiotic relationship. George might mention a volcano planet; someone might paint a strange creature on that planet; George might add that creature to that scene or a different scene.

Lucas was patient, and the artists enjoyed working with him. They kept long hours, often pulling all-nighters fueled by Red Bull to bridge Thursday to Friday. As the concept art department hit full stride, their number grew to about 12. Iain McCaig came onboard early on, welcomed back, a master of character design, who had come up with the look for Darth Maul on Episode I, among others.

While working on the script, Lucas traditionally went on what Jane Bay called his “writing retreat”: that is, he would write in seclusion at home in his converted carriage house from Monday through Thursday, in pencil on his yellow legal pads, taking phone calls only when necessary. On Fridays, he would come in for the art department meeting and the rest of his Lucasfilm business.

As preproduction progressed, Licensing also needed to know about the script, details about characters and creatures and vehicles, in order to initiate product development to coincide with Episode III's release window. Lucas was understanding of licensing's needs and those of publishing; after all, he was going to make a fortune off of it. While usually being accommodating, McCallum nevertheless had a great contempt for

Lucasfilm Corporate, which he often and mostly referred to as the “Dark Side.” He couldn’t wait for licensing, marketing, PR, and the rest of us leeches to be moved to Big Rock Ranch. The farther away, the better. From what he told me, I gathered he felt that licensing and corporate basically made his job of running the nuts and bolts of production harder, from building up the egos in production/ILM/etc. in the fan magazine (by running articles/interviews on ILMers and actors), to gumming up the works in other ways—for instance, the documentary team would want access to record B-roll, or the development of one creature or character or vehicle might take priority over another, or need to be fast-tracked, because its anticipated manufacturing time would take longer or be more complex, etc.—all of these being things a usual movie production didn’t have to deal with.

If production designer Gavin Bocquet, costume designer Trisha Biggar, or stunt coordinator Nick Gillard were in town, Rick would therefore close the art dept. down to only essential personnel in order to obtain important answers from Lucas. At least once or twice, Rick invited one or two HODs (head of departments) to fly over from the UK expressly and strategically to get those answers. When Rick placed Biggar or Bocquet in a room with Lucas, the latter knew they’d reached a critical juncture; it was Rick’s way of putting pressure on him—because without timely decisions from Lucas, preproduction/production would fall hopelessly and expensively behind schedule, something neither of them wanted.

At some point I asked Rick if I could write *The Art of Episode III* book, since I was going to all the meetings. He was fine with it, but wanted me to explain to George what I had in mind, briefly. So after one art session on the third floor, Rick re-introduced me. This time, George looked me up and down. I was being scanned while I made my pitch: “I want to organize the art-of book chronologically,” I said (something like this). “We could tell the story of how you and the art department work together, how things slowly come to pass organically. It’ll be a companion piece to the *Making of* book, by another writer, which he’ll also tell chronologically; I’ll edit that one, and the two books will work together as companion pieces.” His scan complete, George said, “Okay.”

Clone Drones

During those Friday meetings, art department coordinator Fay David must have noticed my hair was thinning on top, because she asked me if I wanted to be one of the “actors” in Lucas’s pickups for *THX 1138*. She figured I wouldn’t mind having my head shaved in order to resemble one of the clones in that film.

That fall of 2002, Episode III art meetings would be followed by short *THX* pickup meetings. George and the artists would discuss, for example, how to create the vehicles digitally; he became enthusiastic while explaining how they’d created THX’s “Lola” back in 1970, modifying a physical car to resemble a futuristic one. (In his teenage days, Lucas had worked as a mechanic on racing cars, and the excitement was still there.) He wanted Erik, Ryan, and Robert to understand that the hero of the film, THX (Robert Duvall), was driving a standard or even substandard car, while trying to outrun much sleeker, faster pursuit vehicles. (This would also be the case for Luke’s landspeeder in the first *Star Wars* film. At first, the English art department built a spacious Cadillac-style vehicle for the farm boy; Lucas then instructed them to modify it, to make it much smaller, for Luke wouldn’t have been able to afford anything but a beat-up model, which he’d then tinkered with and souped up on his own.)

At a subsequent meeting, Robert (Barnes) showed frame grabs from a digitized version of the film. Where there’d been a wall in the original, he’d painted in hundreds of bald-headed clones (who would be played by us recruits) in an auditorium-like multi-level structure under a ceiling spotted with blue halo lights. Next, the animatics team became involved, with supervisor Dan Gregoire showing Lucas a 3-D *Lola*. In a short test the animatics team had rendered the previous night, we saw THX in his *Lola* racing up a ramp into a tunnel.

Lucas wanted more cars in the shot, but was pleased. He was enjoying this animatics stage—a kind of three-dimensional digitally created moving storyboard that he could work with before handing it over to ILM, which would then make the shot or sequence photo-real. He was on the cutting edge of technology. By using a small group of five or six animatics artists, George could plan out precisely what he wanted, so his much more expensive ILM team would take the least amount of time to do their work. The process also provided him with more control.

To prepare us dozen recruits, we were given appointments on the third floor rear balcony where a makeup artist from ILM, Alvin (hence it was called “Alvin’s barber shop”) shaved our heads. It took only a few minutes to transform us. Pictures were taken for our film IDs; we were measured for our clone costumes; later a Call Sheet was emailed. (We were also advised to shave our upper chest hairs as the tunics had an opening beneath the collar line. Alvin wasn’t doing those...)

Early one November morning in 2002, I was the second or third to arrive on one of the minimalist sets constructed on the ILM soundstage. Because I was on hand, I was told to be one of two clones at a terminal and to pretend to operate it, while a real camera dollied by behind us, with Lucas directing. When all of the other clones were on set, we did many drone-like activities together, such as shuffle forward or mill about aimlessly or stand about in groups pretending to have conversations. Our group of about 14 could then be multiplied later to become hundreds, if necessary. During one shot, we were supposed to be fleeing an explosion (in the assembly factory scene).

“Jonathan, raise your feet more while you run,” George shouted.

The first AD also shouted his words, my one piece of direction for the pickups.

The most complex shot, which I wasn’t in, was three or four clones leaping from a scaffolding when THX drove through its underpinnings during the climactic chase.

Most everything was against green screen. Even objects, such as the computer or mechanical arms I was supposed to be operating, were forms/boxes outfitted in green.

It was a grueling 12-hour day for those not used to being on a set (like me), but it was a great experience to become a few pixels in that underrated movie. The experience also taught me more about the norms of production, which were dramatically different from those of Lucasfilm corporate, and which would serve me well: production was much more regimented. Things were done quickly and without complaining with very clear chains of command; it was more professional, a well-oiled machine, but also more uptight (people often compare film sets to military outfits). If you screwed up in production, you were gone. (But it was still an improvisational place: Lucas and McCallum were relaxed enough to add one clone, a bald ILMer who walked onto the stage, late that afternoon; it took only minutes for them to find him a costume so he could join our mindless band).

Afterward I decided to stay bald for a while. But I must have looked awful, because that Christmas, for licensing’s Secret Santa, a colleague gave me a wool cap to cover my head, which leads me to...:

Life at Lucasfilm IV: Licensing

Under the aegis of Roffman, Paul Southern, Lucy Wilson, and the other licensing executives, the general feeling in licensing was one of freelancers fairly content to be working together. In these early days, I was oblivious to underlying tensions and the more convoluted politics, but anyone could see that because most of

us worked with outside licensees, no one had much insight into what anyone else was doing. There was a certain fragmentation, like mercenaries with a common goal—keeping our jobs—but we participated in a few activities that brought us together.

At Skywalker, every Wednesday in the Carriage House, it was someone's turn in licensing to make breakfast. To do so, we were given a budget of \$100. Some people actually cooked eggs or pancakes in the kitchen; another brought in McDonald's Happy Meals. My fourth or fifth week it was my turn and, because Geneviève can cook and make pastries, I was able to bring in madeleines, cakes, and chocolate chip cookies. Thanks to her skills, I met more of my colleagues... (congratulate the messenger, I guess?). There were periodic licensing giveaways, too. Because so many items poured through product development—every toy, T-shirt, clock, pen, model kit, poster, etc.—they had constant storage problems. There was a huge warehouse to archive product, but to liberate office floor space, extra material and the occasional prototype would be lugged into a room. They'd invite in the whole department, and we'd carry away as much as we wanted in boxes. Big ticket items were chosen by lot, but usually they couldn't give away all of it. I managed to supply every *Star Wars*-fan nephew, niece, and neighbor for years (my daughters weren't interested).

Each year for the holiday season, licensing would reserve space in a restaurant in Larkspur or Olema or somewhere, and we'd have a celebratory lunch and exchange Secret Santa presents, a few of which would inevitably cause controversy. Someone "gifted" a nibbled, cold burrito; feelings would be hurt for one reason or another (a sensitive lot; eventually we'd switch to a less personal method, White Elephant, which was also more fun). One time Roffman gave out small *Star Wars*-character statuettes, accompanied by a short poem he'd written about everyone in the department. It may sound hokey, but... well, it was supposed to be.

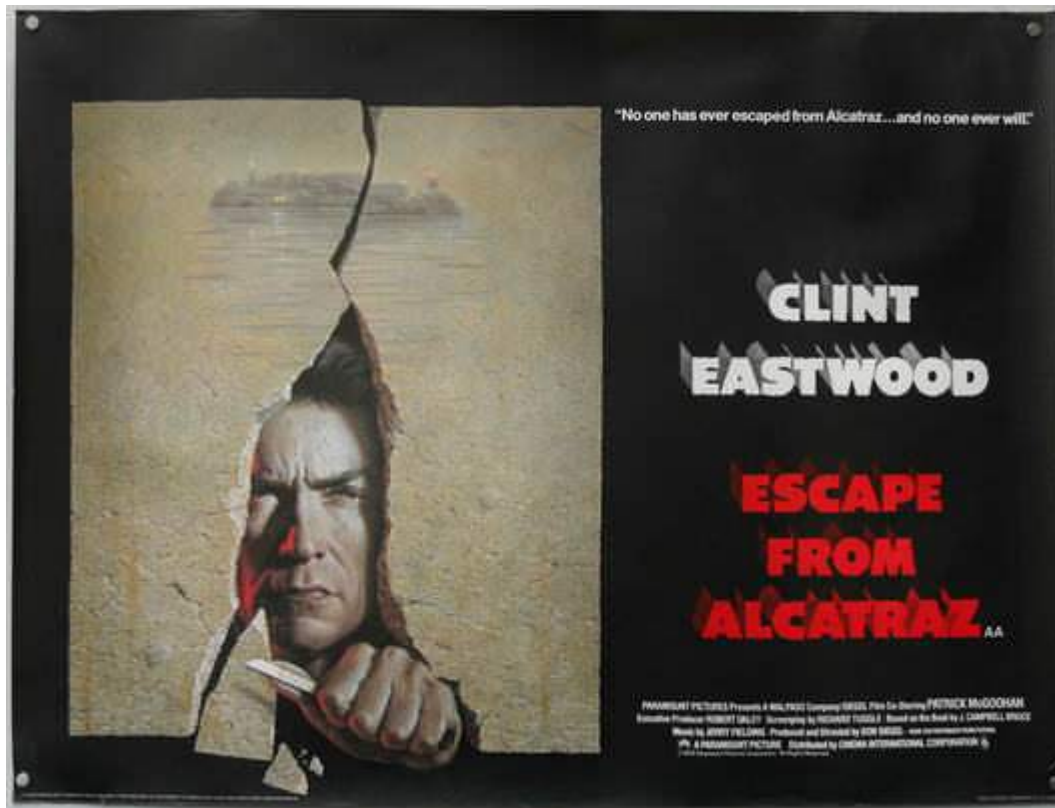
One of the things everyone appreciated in licensing was what we *didn't* do: we had very few meetings—we're talking not more than one a month, at least collectively; publishing would have a single meeting a week to go over book covers, primarily. Licensing wasn't overly controlling, wasn't overly bureaucratic—and, despite the usual griping, was a good place to work, with a number of professionals, from easy-going to eccentric to corporate hack to artistic. In short, Licensing was the usual motley crew of humans, but a talented one.

Next: Big Rock Ranch: Curt, Steve, John, and Terry

The Rise and Fall of Star Wars, Blog #11

7/12/2017

12 Comments



Curt, Steve, John, and Terry

That fall, producer Rick McCallum was pleased when Lucas moved Lucasfilm Corporate, about 200 of us, to our new home: Big Rock Ranch, about five-minutes east of Skywalker Ranch. You could walk over the hills from one "ranch" to the other, past a little observatory with a telescope; I made the journey a couple of times, but it took about 20 minutes and traversed a path otherwise occupied by enormous horned cattle that didn't look happy to see me.

We were the first occupants of Big Rock, a spectacular Frank Lloyd Wright-style compound, with an inner courtyard and fountains that formed an appropriate setting for a statue of Yoda, who was placed on a pedestal to greet visitors.

Inside a high-ceilinged foyer, bejeweled with an original Gustav Klimt painting, we could look through tall, elongated windows onto a lake. When we arrived, there was only a soul patch of water at its bottom. When the rainy season hit, the basin filled up quickly and a family of ducks moved in. An even sleeker and more robust cappuccino machine had been installed not far from the Klimt, where coffee drinks were again free. (This was part of a SF filmmaking tradition, I believe: the first iteration of American Zoetrope had imported an espresso/cappuccino machine from Italy.)

At first I shared an office with Leland Chee. Not long before I started, if an editor had wanted to know, say, what planet was the homeworld of an obscure alien species, they'd have to consult their mini-library of *Star Wars* reference books, which took time. So Lucy had decided to create a gigantic digital database for everything *Star Wars*, mostly in-world, but also containing a fair amount of real-world info. Leland was in charge of populating that Filemaker program. Consequently, every novel, short story, comic book, videogame plot, and roleplaying game went through his hands to make sure it fit continuity and so he could log its contents into his growing database.

I couldn't have done my job without him, and was constantly asking him questions, which he patiently answered. Early on I noticed that Leland was not listed on the mastheads of LucasBooks, our imprint, which went into every book and comic book we did. I suggested to Lucy that he should be on the masthead, and she agreed. Leland chose his own title, and "Keeper of the Holocron" was born. (A "Holocron," I learned, was a Jedi storage device for that Order's arcane lore and wisdom. And Leland, if you read this, please correct any mistakes of my memory.)

After a few months, I was moved to an individual office and told I could choose which original licensing artworks would go up on my two designated walls. Because I was one of the last to move, the binder didn't have much left, but I noticed way in the back a section called something like "Original Poster Art." It was mostly still-lives of flowers, but one had a written description that read something like, "*American Graffiti*—artwork."

On schedule, a friendly operations person showed up with, improbably, Mort Drucker's original artwork for the *American Graffiti* poster. I couldn't believe it. As soon as he left, and for every day afterward, I studied the *Graffiti* collage—for Drucker had done his pen-and-ink caricatures of Richard Dreyfuss (Curt), Ron Howard (Steve), Paul Le Mat (John), Charles Martin Smith (Terry), Wolfman Jack, et al, individually, then cut them out and composed them to make the 27 x 41 one-sheet poster.

For years, visitors to my office were flabbergasted, but the Drucker was just part of Lucas's vast art collection, which he shared with us, not realizing perhaps where certain paintings and drawings were winding up. (The second artwork in my office was the original painting for Clint Eastwood's *Escape from Alcatraz*. It was suprisingly small, only about 10 by 16 inches high.)

Overlook Ranch

Lucas had paid for Big Rock Ranch (BRR) out of his own pocket and we were his beneficiaries. As at Skywalker Ranch, every amenity was supplied and more, from an underground parking lot to a sophisticated heating and cooling system made of enormous pipes plunging deep into the earth, which kept the compound's interior cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

On either end of the main building were supplementary structures: to the east, a weight room with tiled showers and a day-care center. To the west, a footbridge spanned a lily pond populated with turtles, creating a picture that would have looked at home in a Monet painting. On the other side of the footbridge was a spacious cafeteria where one large wall was a mural in the style of Thomas Hart Benton depicting American industry. Next door was a company store and another state-of-the-art movie theater, with stadium seating, redwood paneling, and a giant screen. Of course it had a great sound system.

Big Rock was so grandiose and spacious, it felt empty; meeting rooms abounded and additional rooms were so large that it worked out to something like 1,000 square-feet per employee (visiting Japanese licensees

simply couldn't believe it; one group I toured around went hog wild in the company store, spending about \$750 per person). BRR had been built for 350 people, but we were only about 200 and we were never at capacity. Anyone could walk down the building length-wise, along its 50-yard east-west corridor, without meeting a soul. Large windows on empty stairwells stared eerily onto the still waters of the lake. Some began referring to our new luxury digs as "The Overlook," after the haunted hotel in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (taken from Stephen King's novel), and it caught on.

But this is not to knock it. We may have been, some of us at least, the happiest corporate serfs on the planet.

All of this extravagance didn't come cheap, however. Word was that BRR went way over budget. And because Lucasfilm was between prequel movies, a big layoff was said to be in the cards. At a company meeting in our new Big Rock theater, one executive made what would become a notorious claim, promising that no one "important" would be let go.

Substantial layoffs were announced shortly thereafter, and many people were let go, all of whom considered themselves "important." Lucasfilm was not immune to corporate greed or folly, and in this instance proved itself to be like any other company, for we'd staff up a year or so later. Of course the layoffs were also an excuse for a few execs to get rid of those they considered dead weight. On the positive side, licensing did give six months to those being let go to find another job. Everyone I knew found another place to work before their term expired.

Publishing was shaken up, too. I was taken off the George Lucas Books imprint and Lucy Wilson moved back to Skywalker Ranch, where she would eventually publish: *Cinema by the Bay* (on SF Bay Area filmmaking); *Blockbusting* (on movie financials); and *Cause of Death* (on medical statistics). A new publishing director was hired, Amy Gary, and I stayed on *Star Wars*, along with senior editor Sue Rostoni, who began handling novels and comic books around that time. (Sue and I would remain the two constants for about a decade.)

There were further changes. In 2003 Lucas replaced Radley with Mich Chau, the former CFO. From Singapore, educated at Wellesley and Stanford Business School, Chau was profiled in *Variety* and quoted as saying that one of her career mantras was, "Have a clear moral compass."

A Word About Licensing

Entrepreneur.com defines "licensing" as, "a business arrangement in which one company gives another company permission to manufacture its product for a specified payment." For Lucasfilm, this meant licensing out the company IP to other companies—for a substantial sum—which then manufactured toys, comic books, sneakers, and hundreds of other products (thousands, over the years) based on *Star Wars*, using the appropriate logo and other copyrighted material, all subject to approval. For every item sold, licensing also collected a royalty.

A brief history of licensing at Lucasfilm is as follows: 20th Century–Fox did not want to make *Star Wars*. The only notable exception at the studio was its production executive Alan Ladd, Jr., who had liked *Graffiti*, which he saw in a pre-release preview (a copy of the film was smuggled onto the lot for him to see), and signed up Lucas for his next film. The business arm of Fox, however, plotted against Ladd and Lucas, used stalling tactics to withhold preproduction money and delay the contract, hoping that they'd eventually go away. Turning the tables on them, Lucas enlisted the services of lawyers Tom Pollock, Jake Bloom, and Andy

Rigrod, as well as his agent Jeff Berg, and took on the studio, saying in essence, “You want to negotiate? Okay, let’s negotiate *every* term.”

When they started their battle, *Graffiti* was in limbo. The film’s financier and distributor, Universal Studios thought it was a turkey. But Fox delayed so long that Lucas and *Graffiti* producer Coppola, fresh off *The Godfather*, had the time to wrestle Universal to the ground and compel them to release *Graffiti*, which turned out to be a huge hit (still one of the greatest cost-to-profit earners ever, because it cost so little—about \$800,000, earning to date \$115,000,000, according to Boxoffice Mojo). Suddenly Lucas had more leverage in his negotiations with Fox. He also had more cash, and was able to pay for most of *Star Wars*’ preproduction himself. Contractually, his short-term goal with Fox was to ensure that only quality product was associated with his space fantasy film, which meant a few T-shirts, comic books, and lunchboxes, while avoiding inferior quality knockoffs. He and his lawyers thereby managed to acquire *half* the merchandising rights for *Star Wars*. Much more importantly, instead of more money for Lucas as director/writer, which they could have asked for based on *Graffiti*’s success—they were able seize the rights to the *Star Wars* sequels. Since then no studio has been so financially irresponsible (as far as I know), while Lucas and his allies have been credited with one of the better deals of the century.

By 1979, Lucas was making real money from his first film’s licensing, so he was able to move Lucasfilm from its trailer in a parking lot across the street from Universal to the Olson Brothers Egg Company Depot, a building he purchased in the same vicinity. It was a case of location, location, location; he and Marcia Lucas figured that its value would only go up. They renovated the 30,000 square-foot old brick structure, turning it into a design statement that prefigured Skywalker and Big Rock Ranches. They had it structurally reinforced, planted green ficus to climb up the repaired exterior, added a humidified atrium in the interior with polarized skylights for tree growth (which anticipated the ranch’s Solarium), and a courtyard office with French doors and a family style kitchen (where Spielberg would famously make cookies for actors auditioning for *Raiders of the Lost Ark*). Into this masterwork moved Lucasfilm licensing, marketing, and publishing, with its first president, Charlie Weber.

(I was once chatting with Bob Wilkins, who hosted a popular late night Bay Area TV show called *Creature Features* in the ’70s, which has since attained cult status. Apart from achieving local fame, he was the first to broadcast *Night of the Living Dead*, and I remember he brought author Anne Rice onto his minimalist set to talk about her new book, *Interview with a Vampire*. Locally, Wilkins was the only one paying attention to the genre, the only one to broadcast old horror movies, the good, the bad, and the horrible, as well as old Japanese monster flicks—while genteelly mocking it all, in suit, tie, and nerd glasses. Lucas wore similar glasses and must have been a big fan, for, Wilkins told me, he offered Wilkins the job of Lucasfilm president circa 1974. Wilkins declined. He passed away in 2009 and I spoke to him circa 2002.)

Lucas christened his licensing division Black Falcon, Ltd. Because Fox owned half the licensing rights, it made sense to locate Lucasfilm corporate down south in order to keep an eye on the studio and their shared businesses.

Years later in the Skywalker art archives I found many concept sketches for the Black Falcon logo. Lucas saw every detail as an opportunity to create art, or have it created, and went through dozens of designs before hitting on the right one. By contrast, during the early days of the new presidency, the logos of licensing, ILM, LucasArts, and Skywalker Sound were re-designed, each subsidiary’s iconic images—a lightsaber, a magician, etc.—were replaced with meaningless corporate swirls in a vain attempt to homogenize the different branches.

Back in 1978, while prepping the first sequel, Lucas hadn't gone back to the studio for financing. Instead, he shocked Fox by announcing that he would pay for *The Empire Strikes Back* himself. Thus began the real rise of Lucas and his franchise. Until then he'd been a glorified work-for-hire. By bankrolling his own film, Lucas took a calculated risk in a bid for real independence. Also, because he could go to any studio to distribute *Empire*, Fox had to give up an additional 40 percent of the licensing rights to Lucasfilm in order to remain the franchise distributor. (Fox still managed to keep 10 percent, though eventually Lucas would buy that back.)

Empire turned out to be a hit, too, and Lucasfilm profited accordingly. The inevitable consequence was that Lucas decided to move his corporate HQ north to further consolidate his businesses (he'd already moved ILM up north in 1978). He also felt that Weber and others at the Egg Company were becoming tainted by the Hollywood life style; too many executives were driving Porsches, the story went. Lucas laid off Weber, and a few people were found offices at ILM or in scattered offices throughout Marin County. Most of the Egg Company was let go, and Lucas, reportedly, felt terrible about it. In fact, the Egg Company layoff prefigured the Big Rock layoff 20 years later in that people were given severance packages and six months to find another job. Lucas had also begun a pattern with Weber, his first president. Lucas had wanted to change things for a long while before finally acting, and hadn't been overly communicative.

"[The move north] happened two or three years earlier than I anticipated," Weber said. "It was sudden and somewhat abrupt."

(As for the renovated Egg Company, Marcia Lucas would retain ownership as part of their divorce settlement and eventually sold it. In 1994 it was razed for a parking lot; Marcia organized a wake for the building the day before.)

As mentioned, licensing had died out by the mid-1980s when Black Falcon was merged into Lucasfilm and renamed the Licensing Division. Thanks to the first film of the Prequel Trilogy and canny licensing execs, by the time I arrived in 2001, the department had undergone another name change, to "Lucas Licensing"—and was an economic juggernaut.

Next: Revenge of the Sith

(Thanks to RobertRogerRossblogspot.com for the architectural info on The Egg Building.)



Bob Wilkins on Creature Features

The Rise and Fall of Star Wars, Blog #12

7/14/2017

4 Comments



Revenge of the Sith

Principal photography for Episode III: *Revenge of the Sith* began on at Fox Studios, Sydney, Australia, on Monday, June 30, 2003. Through a series of circumstances I can't go into, I ended up on the set writing a book about it.

The day after I arrived in Sydney—the first day I admired the huge bats in some kind of park and walked all over the place—I made my way to the Fox Studios, driving on the “wrong” side of the road. After I was given a pass in the central office, I made my way to the set, where I recounted my nerve-wracking drive to animation supe Rob Coleman, who advised me, “When in doubt, always stay on the left.” Simple, but it worked!

At the time, mesmerized by a 1,001 sights, sounds, and even smells, I didn't fully comprehend the importance of Lucas shooting Episode III exclusively with digital cameras. It took a while for me to understand that he was a steadfast agitator for the digital revolution and what that meant (more on this later). His chief ally in this movement was McCallum, who handled the technical side. Rick told me how his camera operators had pored over the instruction manuals when the beautiful Sony equipment had arrived for Episode II, which Lucas had also filmed digitally. Now they were old pros.

I was on set for a little more than month in Sydney, in two 17 day trips, I believe, and it was amazing to see a *Star Wars* movie being made; to see Lucas directing; sets being built; actors in motion; people dressed as aliens eating eggs and sausages. I was given a free pass to wander around; there were no minders, nothing was off limits, though I gave the three principals—Hayden Christensen (Anakin Skywalker), Natalie Portman (Padmé Naberrie), and Ewan McGregor (Obi-Wan Kenobi)—a wide berth, after some advice from Lynne Hale in PR.

Overall, the crew was welcoming, from “A” camera operator Calum McFarlane and 1st AD Colin Fletcher, to the craftspeople painting the wooden sets. If you were a John Knoll or Rob Coleman, you could suddenly be on the spot, with about fifty people or more waiting to hear how their on-set work was going to be affected by ILM’s postproduction concerns. In my case, I tried my best to be invisible. I took notes the old-fashioned way, with pen and notebook. That seemed like a better idea than trying to record anything, which would’ve made people uptight. By writing things down by hand, I could hear something said or see something done, move off, wait a minute or two, and then write it down, so people wouldn’t be made to feel self-conscious. However, I had no backup for my scribbles. Ridiculously, my entire book resided in those singular notes. I didn’t back it up digitally. After a 10 or 12 hour day, I was too beat and too ignorant to do anything but watch bizarre Australian game shows on TV (*Deal or No Deal* was fascinating)...

Their Generation

I also had to do my day job while I was in Australia, which would be the template whenever I was writing a book at Lucasfilm: research (except in the archives) and writing was always done mornings, nights (not too often), on the bus, and weekends. I was assigned a table up on a mezzanine above a small stage where photographer Keith Hamshire was taking reference pics of each actor in costume following their scenes. This was done for licensing’s sake; Hamshire’s photographs were essential to many products, from books and posters, to clothes, to whatever. In the same area an immense full-body scanner, which looked more sci-fi than anything on set, had been set up to create full-body scans of actors in costume for the action figures and high-end sculptures. So while Hamshire would ask Ewan or Natalie or a Neimoidian to turn for a profile, I’d be busy upstairs doing email. (Hamshire’s work was important to licensing, but not so important to a few who saw these photography sessions as an imposition. One of them refused to cooperate, Rick said, until he threatened a lawsuit.)

Back on set, whenever George asked Jimmy Smits (Bail Organa) to modify his performance or alter an action, Smits would reply, “Yes, sir.” Often when George asked Christensen or McGregor, they would reply, “Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

Back on the Original Trilogy, Mark Hamill (Luke Skywalker), Harrison Ford (Han Solo), and Carrie Fisher (Princess Leia) had understood instinctively where Lucas was coming from, though he was famously uncommunicative. It was nothing personal. As many know, “Faster” and/or “More intense,” was what Lucas often requested of his actors.

Part of his general reticence on any set was due to the fact that he simply didn’t want to be there. Lucas had told Roger Christian back in 1976, set decorator on *Star Wars*, that each day he woke up with a metaphorical sack of large stones on his back and spent the day struggling to remove them, painfully, one by one. On set for Episode III, I overheard George asking himself one morning, “Why am I putting myself through this again?”

In 1978, three crewmembers got into a post-film analysis of their ex-boss, concluding that he took too much on himself and stressed himself out unnecessarily. They also thought he often put his trust in the wrong people. I’ve read similar complaints about similar visionaries. Evidently, when you’re hounded by success, it often becomes difficult to tell who has your best interests at heart, particularly given that many folks may have already told you things that didn’t turn out to be true, or said that something wouldn’t work that did turn out to work, and vice versa, etc., etc. It’s a difficult position to be in.

Despite his directorial shorthand and his on-set suffering, Lucas, Ford, Fisher, and Hamill worked well together on the Original Trilogy and remained friends afterward. Lucas seemed particularly close with Fisher.

It didn't help that Portman and McGregor may have been wounded by negative reviews of the first two prequels, making this last one harder for them. He and Portman were never ready to be interviewed (instead I relied on EPKs). Christensen, on the other hand, had less history and was more relaxed. I was given the go-ahead to shadow him for a day, morning till evening. He was ready to talk: young, smart, with his own production company. Like many actors, he was smaller in person, more vulnerable. When we walked from his dressing room to the immense soundstage, where Lucas and dozens of veteran technicians and craftspeople were waiting to shoot the next scene, with thousands of dollars disappearing every minute, I asked Hayden if he wasn't apprehensive or scared.

"No," he said. "I'm excited."

Because it was winter down under, it was dark by the time we drove from the studio to his rented apartment (or house, I can't remember). Christensen was up front, next to the driver, and I was in the backseat when he turned around and started telling me it was sometimes difficult playing Anakin Skywalker the way George wanted him to, perhaps more restrained than Christensen would have preferred.

I listened, knowing I wouldn't be able to write about it then, but trying to explain that Lucas was perhaps not explaining why he was doing things in a certain way because he simply didn't have the time or the inclination to do so. It wasn't his style.

(Please note: This was not Christensen's verdict on Lucas—only a step along the way. Stay tuned...)
Next: A Pleasant Dracula